

Ai No Kusabi

The Space Between

Vol. 3

NIGHTMARE

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Yaoi



Novel

Ai No Kusabi *The Space Between*

Vol. 3
NIGHTMARE

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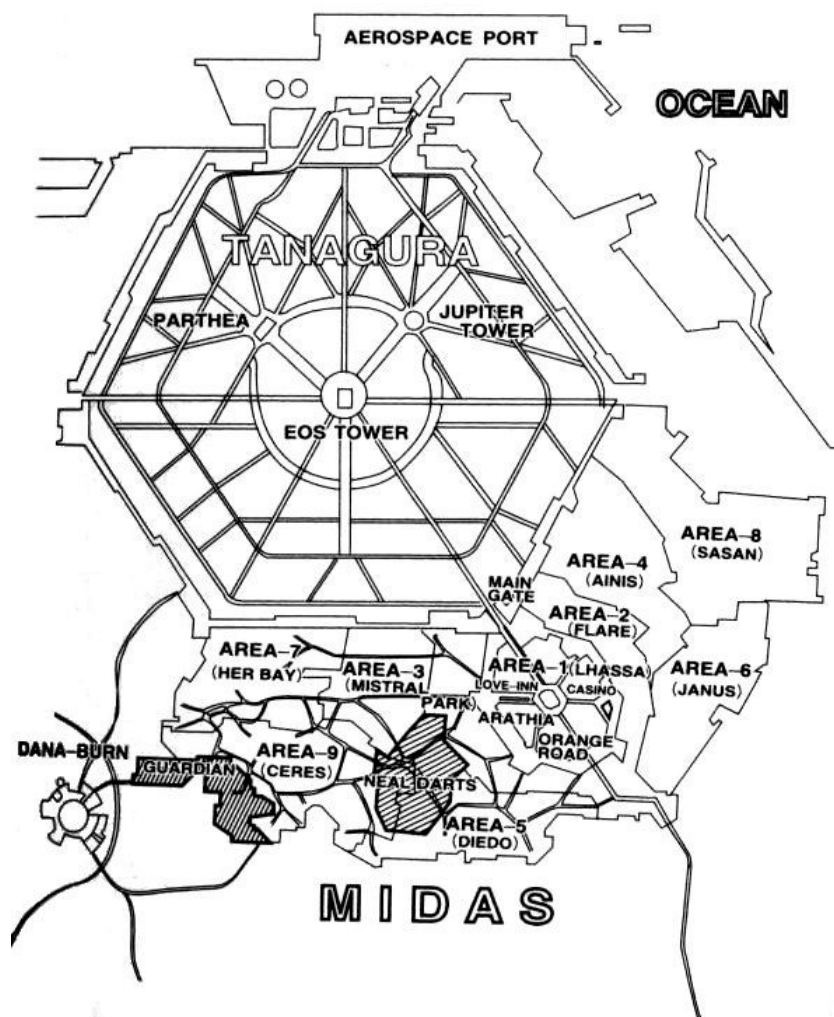
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Chapter 1

Pet ownership in the Tanagura central metropolis was regulated in its entirety according to Pet Law, as explicated in Article Nine:

- I. Qualifications
- II. Registration procedures
- III. Pet husbandry
- IV. Disease prevention
- V. Breeding requirements
- VI. Quality assurance
- VII. Prohibitions
- VIII. Disciplinary boundaries
- IX. Disposal procedures

The rules were more than a set of regulations governing the elites who reared pets as a kind of status symbol; they were how aristocrats favored by Jupiter could call attention to their chosen status.

The objects referred to as "pets" were more specifically sex dolls produced in licensed breeding facilities for the purposes of providing domesticated playthings to clientele. Sex dolls were genetically identical to humans, but were and remained manufactured toys.

Sex dolls were created through artificial techniques alien to natural reproductive drives. As proof of its origins, each body had a manufacturing serial number inscribed on the sole of the foot, and all of its records were managed and maintained by its breeding facility.

They were living things—but they were not human. Consequently,

while pets had to be provided a basic minimum of discipline and upkeep, their existence required no further obligations.

It was only natural that pets, identified by their owners solely by their manufacturing serial numbers and lacking any degree of human dignity, would be denied any human rights and privileges. The only "rank" they possessed was that bestowed by their certificate of registered pedigree, and whatever value attended the "privilege" of being owned by a member of the elite.

Nevertheless, constrained by the ironclad strictures of the Zein class system, a certificate attesting a pet's elite ownership was a mesmerizing accessory to the people of Midas—a symbol of a dream always tantalizingly out of reach. Not just anybody or anything could become an elite's pet; only a select few passed through the selection gauntlet. The pets that served as status symbols for the anointed high class—the rulers of Tanagura—were reared in the Palace Tower of Eos, and there they enjoyed every conceivable luxury. Such fairy tales never failed to enchant the masses. As to how the fairy tales actually ended—nobody spent much time thinking about that.

The total value of a Tanagura pet was the product of a simple calculation. If the status of the owner was high, so was that of the pet. The kennel a pet came from ran a distant second in comparison. And *within* the lines of pets, the pressing question was how long they had to bow, scrape, and come to heel in order to win over an elite's heart in some way.

The visible results were all that counted: 3 good bloodline, an attractive appearance, and "purity." Those were the indispensable qualities every pet scrambled after. But being beautiful by itself did not guarantee a doll's success—there had to be that spark of individuality. Pet obedience was a basic requirement, but demonstrating a sense of worth was a reliable strategy for coming out on top in the survival of the fittest. It was something no amount of training could accomplish.

On the surface, the pets in Eos lived sheltered lives of harmonious tranquility. The stratospheric class of elites desired pets appropriate to their social status. Or, rather, given that living in Eos *alone*

implied a distinctive rank, raising a pet deserving of such a crown became a kind of duty to the owners.

Among the pets, the highest grades of Academy-bred purebloods were reserved as the playthings of the Blondies. And if they fell in rank, so did that of the pet's manufacturer.

Iason making a pet out of a Ceres mongrel like Riki showed a brazen disregard for unspoken precedents. It was the first major scandal since the beginning of Eos. The elites reacted in shock, making their repugnance plain while they simultaneously attempted to cover their intense curiosity.

As the embodiment of the perfect class society, the authority of the Blondies permeated every corner of Eos. As one would expect, no one dared criticize them directly.

I'm taking a Ceres mongrel as a pet.

It was an audacious challenge that couldn't be described as anything but foolhardy, arousing an ongoing tidal wave of intrigue in response. Naturally, muffled voices of derision bordering on contempt could be heard high and low. Among the company of the pets, the voices were all the more extreme and insidious. Bitter words filled with jealousy and scorn escalated, seizing upon any excuse to grow ever louder.

Riki didn't care. As far as he was concerned, pets that knew only the sterile and sealed environment of Eos were like babies, with their whining fits and temper tantrums. Despite all their pride, none of them were capable of acting on their own. Their vulgarities and expletives only betrayed their laughably thin vocabularies. The gutless looks in their eyes drew about as much blood as passing wind. They were stupid, weak, and hardly worth Riki's consideration.

Useless.

Silently intimidating the childish pets was simple—but sometimes Riki couldn't help but get angry. Eos overflowed with pets, and yet there wasn't a single one he could really let his frustrations out on.

He wasn't inclined to waste his energy on pets not worth his time, and taking them on over every little thing wasn't worth the bother. Getting in their faces and taking them down a few notches didn't do the job, so he preferred to mix things up with the security guards and vent that way.

He'd seriously thrown down with them once, no holds barred, and caught sheer hell for it. He wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. Still, his kind of attitude clearly hardened the rest of the pets toward him and spun the vicious cycle all the faster.

Cooped up in his room all day with nothing to do didn't suit Riki's temperament, and taking advantage of the various amusements offered at the salons and pet leisure centers in Eos only staved off the boredom for a little while. As a result, wherever Riki went, trouble large and small was sure to follow. Riki never thought *he* was the troublemaker, though... it was always the *other* guy starting the fights.

It didn't matter if that were true. It was clear that he lacked even the merest modicum of restraint. He possessed no inclination to retreat first or watch his step.

"Stay back."

"Don't touch him."

"Just get out of his line of sight and nobody gets hurt."

Riki's arrogant, insolent attitude was every bit as overt as the verbal abuse he caught from the pets. Neither would make the first step in the name of conciliation. That a slum mongrel—a born enemy to the people of Midas—should be a Blondy's plaything aroused deep feelings of antipathy.

Rough-hewn, rugged, and with a will of iron, a wolf suddenly being released in the midst of a flock of sheep would have elicited the same kind of instinctual fear and loathing. No matter where he was, his nature was understood at a glance. The inevitable, blinding jealousy trailed behind his overpowering pheromones. However, it was possible that Riki arriving on the scene with an utterly different

value system had awakened unknown fear in the pets... pets that otherwise counted illiteracy and ignorance as virtues.

But what got under their skin more than anything was the undeniable reality of those small, betraying marks on his body. Except for the sharing of bodily fluids that went on in the public eye and the private sharing of secret thrills that often went on beneath the covers afterward, Riki didn't get physically involved with anybody.

At first, when Riki had shown up for his debut—but not the soirees afterward—the rest of them had a good laugh at his expense. He lacked the basic common sense that every pet possessed, not to mention manners, good taste, and class. No owner was going to mate his pet with an unevolved monkey like Riki. Without a potential mating partner, he'd never get an invitation to the sex soirees—and a pet that couldn't mount or be mounted was of no use to anybody. *Everyone* knew that.

"Serves him right."

"He's just getting what he deserves!"

"What do you expect from a slum mongrel?"

He was destined to be tossed on the scrap heap before long. Nobody harbored the slightest doubt in that regard.

Except that it didn't happen.

Riki didn't attend the sex soirees because he wasn't asked. Far from it, his master Iason threw all such invitations in the trash. When this became clear, the astonishment was universal. Riki never showed up for the sex soirees, overtly or covertly. And yet his body was covered with the evidence of lovemaking.

It's almost enough to make you believe that Iason is the one sleeping with him.

Nobody knew who first raised the possibility, but the rumor shook the pet community like an earthquake. The hickies were brands on Riki's skin asserting ownership rights.

Ordinarily, a pet only showed such marks upon leaving a sex soiree or after mating rights had been secured. Any pet that indulged their sexual desires in the shadows, without a designated partner, would make certain—to a fanatical degree—that no evidence of their sated lusts remained behind.

While an addiction to sex was in the character of a pet, the reality was that pairing with just anybody would earn nothing but contempt. And, of course, the appropriate discipline awaited those labeled as too easy, which was cause enough to lose a pet the affection of its master. In the worst case, "disposal" was the consequence. The collective pride of pets didn't allow them to admit that they were disposable goods, but to their elite owners, the pets were just another replaceable luxury item.

A persistent hickey usually indicated the existence of a significant other, and that evidence alone was taken by the pet community as a kind of status symbol. And though Riki never once attended a sex soiree, the marks never disappeared from his body.

"A master sleeping with his pet..."

The evidence of something *inconceivable* according to the old traditions of Eos only made the pets that much more indignant. Their loathing for Riki only grew fiercer as they were haunted by thoughts of the rebel moaning in Iason's embrace.

Thrusting his hips and shaking his ass. They ground their teeth as they pictured his swollen member exercised to completion...

The jealousy was severe. All they had to do was imagine Iason doing with Riki as he pleased, penetrating wherever he wanted, and they were overwhelmed with white-hot anger and betrayal.

Why? Why *him*? Why *Riki*?

The questions only stoked their frustrated passions further.

Even their owners who waited upon them hand and foot wouldn't dare lay a finger on them. Pets were for looking, not touching or loving. That was common knowledge among the elite.

Babysitting the pets every day of their lives was a human species even lower than the pets: the "furniture." Furniture was a household appliance, a consumable good; there was no need to treat furniture like people. And yet in Eos, automated to the hilt with state-of-the-art technology, without the furniture there to care for them, the pets would starve to death while sleeping in rags. Nobody ever asked or wondered why.



But things changed after Riki came to town. He laughed at their

common sense. He acted as if the rules weren't made for him. And those implicit understandings that were never discussed... he trampled them underfoot without a care.

His existence was hateful, mortifying, and distressing.

The rules the pets had lived by started to fall apart. Before long, the pets were gripped by the fear that their resale value could also fall. Somebody had to do something.

And yet...

Despite Riki's chaotic behavior, their owners only rambled on using big words they didn't understand about how "IQ differences" affected what was legal and what wasn't. No one was seriously prepared to call anybody out for anything.

"It's because he's a Blondy's pet." That was what the issue eventually came down to. They *assumed* that would settle things, but simply saying Riki was Iason's pet didn't mean all the Blondies' pets had or would enjoy a similar status.

Far from it, actually. Before taking Riki into his stable, for at least six months—perhaps as long as a year—Iason had swapped pets back and forth on a regular basis. Every one was the highest grade of Academy purebred, no expense spared.

An Academy pedigreed purebred with the papers to prove that it had once belonged to a Blondy commanded a top price. No one ever got the real dirt on what was going on, but Iason's need to keep switching pets was taken at face value. On the rare occasion that Iason actually exercised his pet breeding rights, he'd often sent his pets to a different sex soiree every night of the week. On top of that, he wasn't diligent about betrothing them, either.

Then why? Why the trash at the bottom of the heap, a despised slum mongrel? When were the pets going to get their fair share of similar favors?

Every time these thoughts crossed their minds, all of them—bitch and stud alike—seethed with raw jealousy. One of them had been

singled out as special. The uniqueness of a monster who would have been cast out in any just world could not be tolerated.

Midas blood and a slum-bred backbone mixed like oil and water. But faced with the fierce elitism of the pets, Riki's pride only hardened. The more that Riki took their slander and criticism, the more insolent he became. He spit in the face of their frank animosity. He pointedly ignored their prejudices, and answered the threat of real harm with a hard smack of the palm. Riki was nobody's suck-up—Iason included—even when he knew perfectly well that things would go better if he gave a little ground here and there. But the way he saw it, if he rolled over even once, he'd be kissing ass forever.

Still, the other pets didn't spend their days prostrated at their owners' feet. While some indulged in "sex therapy" on the sly—for the thrill of it and to burn through the empty hours—others gloated with self-satisfaction as their slavish hangers-on catered to their every need.

The rivalries between warring pet factions were intense and all-encompassing. The lynchings that often resulted were practically commonplace, and were done with sufficient subterfuge that the owners themselves didn't appear to notice... or, rather, the owners only noticed to the extent that any owner expressed concern for a mere status symbol. It wasn't as if they were actually *attached* to their pets. Certainly no more than to any other aesthetically pleasing item.

The vexation and fear could be suddenly extinguished or aroused. As pets bartered for their sexuality, they knew their time was short. They only remained fresh and desirable for so long.

The onset of puberty.

The end of virginity.

Pairing and mating.

These three events defined their existence—and once the events passed, so did a pet's real value. It was the first and abiding truth of

those bred and reared in Eos. Even a pet of the rarest breed had no promise of "tomorrow." No matter how beautiful or proud, time would surely and cruelly pass.

In Eos, the roster of pets changed by the day. A pet with a bored master was a pet whose time was up. All the more so for the males; even if he had demonstrated his virility and been successfully paired, a male pet past his mid-teens was a rare sight in Eos. For the pets with voices that had changed due to puberty, there were plenty of dealers in Tanagura offering hormone suppression drugs. The disgust and anxiety accompanying the transition from youth to stud arose from the rampant paranoia that it might cost him the affection of his master. There was no other means of livelihood; such was the tragedy of the male pet.

And thus, pets were shameless. No matter what they were told to do, no matter how idiotic, they promptly responded—it was bred into them. It was why Eos held debaucheries and sexual banquets more dreadful than anything found even in the harems of Midas, where sex was sold over the counter.

Once Iason had put a measured effort into training Riki, he intended to throw a coming-out party for the newly arrived pet as per the custom. Afterward, an appropriate bitch would be chosen and Riki would mount her.

At that point, it was unlikely that his opposition would voice disapproval of the unprecedented introduction of a slum mongrel bloodline into the mix. Iason harbored no concerns—the right to approve a coupling between pets generally resided with the higher-class of the two owners, anyway. Class distinctions were an unassailable barrier. Never would a subordinate deny his superior anything. Furthermore, a pet was little more than an expendable luxury that had no say in the matter. If a proposal was made and the owner accepted, then the pets would copulate. No questions asked.

Up until that point, Iason had never exercised his breeding rights. From that point forward, however, he intended to try. Same-sex relationships were the norm in the slums, and Iason was curious as to how his mongrel would mount a female. He didn't care whether

Riki's sex life had put him on top or on bottom.

According to the open book that was a mongrel's life, the same-sex pairings that went on in the slums had nothing unusual or particularly interesting to offer. Nothing could be as boring as the way a person regularly got off. There was no value in bringing a mongrel to Eos for the express purpose of doing what he usually did.

But still water grew fetid; a little change now and then was a good thing, no matter the setting. Iason still wasn't certain of how to go about upsetting the status quo, but the experience certainly wouldn't be boring. Which was why Riki's first sex pairing was going to be with a bitch.

However, after a mere three-day attempt, with a wry smile on his lips, Iason found himself rethinking his entire plan.

The proprieties of a pet debut were the last things on Riki's mind. As Iason should have predicted, Riki's head was filled with nothing but contrary stubbornness. Whenever he opened his mouth, out came a whirlwind of slum slang and vulgarities. Caught off guard, up came the fists and flying went the feet.

Iason hardly broke a sweat. *Good God, but a slum mongrel has a lot of spunk in him! At this rate, things won't get boring for some time.* He wisely kept such thoughts to himself, though.

Easily strapping the rampaging Riki to the bed and binding his hands, Iason said with a dramatic sigh. "Such behavior does cast a pall over your debut."

Riki bared his teeth. "Then that's the kind of creature you should've bred for yourself," he strapped in return. "Can't a Tanagura Blondy have his pick of the litter?"

"Not a solution at this juncture. To one extent or another, you've become the object of every rumor in Eos. Once you've been properly trained in the manner befitting a Blondy pet, we'll dispatch you to a party."

In order to properly convey to Riki the "training befitting a Bloody pet," Iason left Riki without any clothes for the first month. Stabled naked in their rooms, pets were compelled to comprehend that they were "things" without freedom or rights. At the same time, exposing them to the prying eyes of strangers trained any bashfulness out of them.

As a general rule, the mating of pets was a spectator sport. Even if accustomed to sex early, pets normally wouldn't have mounted each other in front of people before. The confident male might boast that he wouldn't go limp under the pressure, but all that confidence meant nothing if the stud couldn't keep himself hard during the show. While completing the act was pressure enough, the possibility of losing face during it was deeply undesirable for everyone involved.

That being the case, training was a necessity from day one. Iason had no expectations that his slum wolf could be turned into a lamb, but a dimwit creature who nipped and snarled at the drop of a hat was also unacceptable. "Do not embarrass your owner" was a basic rule drilled into the head of every pet.

For the elite, an appreciation for pet pairing and mating was a mark of refinement. Choosing partners for one's pet and tallying up the successful copulations was the sure sign of an accomplished owner. This was how they enjoyed the "ripeness" of their pets, and basked in the light of their own excellence.

In addition, doing so increased a pet's market value. Female pets that arrived from the Midas harems skilled in the techniques of the bedroom knew this better than most. An ambitious pet could increase her resale value the most in the act of being mounted. No matter what the situation, they never held back in the least—so much so that when it came to breaking in pubescent males and deflowering virgins, partnering the inexperienced with a pet out of the harems had become common practice in Eos.

Pets raised "pure" had no sense of shame. Every activity, from bathing to defecation, was entrusted to the furniture without the slightest hesitation or embarrassment. Preparation for mating included learning all the techniques of self-stimulation, and they

practiced without hesitation... and it was naturally left to the furniture to do the straightening up afterward.

Because of the rule dictating mating before an audience, copulation unquestioningly became the supreme moment in life for pets. Nevertheless, there were definitive individual distinctions in a pet's mating cycle. It was quietly understood that unpaired pets with unmanageable sex drives would find the necessary release in the shadows; as long as no evidence of their passionate struggles remained on the flesh, their owners would turn a blind eye. And those who could not find willing partners for such trysts instead found satisfaction in the oral ministrations of the furniture.

The owners knew a lot more about what their pets were up to than they ever let on. But no owner wished proof of his relaxed training skills to be made public, and that was where the duty of the furniture lay. Although a pet was *taught* to be obedient to its master, the furniture had no choice. Sexual contact between pets and furniture was generally prohibited, and an owner would never go so far as to openly condone such behavior, but the great majority of pets realized that as long as they kept it to themselves, nobody would object. And if an owner happened to catch sight of such activities, the pets had no doubts that the disposable furniture would be the ones to catch hell for it.

However, Riki possessed none of this experience. Exposing himself to the furniture or to Iason aroused nothing in him but distaste. It was enough to bring to mind the one time he'd played the bad boy, spreading his legs for Iason and waving himself in the Blondy's face.

Iason found this surprising. He'd imagined that, bound by no prohibitions, a slum mongrel would fuck anything he could lay his hands on. The reality was that Riki picking up Iason and taking him to a love hotel had been a spur-of-the-moment barter of flesh for cash in lieu of hush money. Riki possessed his own sense of morals—and beneath his hard, strident exterior, he proved surprisingly straightforward.

Realizing this, Iason thought, *I may have stumbled across a diamond in the rough here.* He laughed to himself. *That being the case, I'd better take pains to train him properly.*

If taught carefully, even such a mongrel could be changed. As the thoughts evolved in his mind, Iason gained a whole new interest in the unpolished rock that was Riki. The indisputable fact was that he'd once made Riki come right before his eyes. The pride Riki so stubbornly clung to, even when naked, had to be summarily smashed.

Riki's reactionary response—in so many words—was to spit out poisonous venom, lashing out violently with his colorful vocabulary. He refused to budge.

Iason pinned down the struggling, flushed Riki, exposed his nether regions, and left the rest to the furniture, which assiduously stimulated him with its mouth until his back arched with pleasure. Once finished, the furniture cleaned up. Iason knew that the furniture was far more effective at *that* job.

During these ordeals, being felled by the furniture aroused in Riki the greatest degree of loathing.

His buttocks writhing as the furniture licked at his glans.

His groin quivering as the furniture sucked on his shaft.

Moans spilling from his mouth as the furniture teased his tip with the point of its tongue.

Paroxysms of pleasure shaking his hips as the furniture grasped his sack in a caressing grip.

Displaying such wanton behavior before Iason and the furniture was unbearable. Nothing could be worse than being brought to the very verge of orgasm, and then being forced to satisfy himself with his own hands.

Watching Riki with his loins bared, his body shamefully quivering and groaning as the furniture sucked him off, Iason crouched upon his knees and filled Riki's ears with prickling abuse.

"I heard that slum mongrels possess not a scrap of moral fiber," Iason said. "Are the rumors wrong? Where's the spunk that made you drag me to that squalid hotel?"

"I'm—not—like—that—you—sex—fiend!"

"But it's common knowledge that pets partake in sex in front of everyone."

"You—elites—are—a—bunch—of—perverts!"

"Your debut is in two months. You must be ready by then. By whatever means necessary."

"Turn me into a laughingstock, you mean! What's my value, considering I'm slum trash?"

"Even an ignorant, impertinent, depraved monkey has at least a single redeeming quality. I intend to ferret that out." With these words Iason thrust his hand forward and grasped Riki's testes. A hoarse, inarticulate cry rose from Riki's throat. "I have no desire to be shamed at your debut, either. You are my—Iason Mink's—pet, Riki. Every nerve in your body will know and remember that."

Until Riki obediently opened his legs and jerked off with his own two hands, Iason would make the furniture go down on him. Riki's disgrace at having his limbs bound and his privates exposed was doubled by the furniture licking his organ—all the more so when the furniture took the penis in its mouth and made Riki erect. Being treated as such was the price Riki paid for clinging to his stubborn pride. Iason intended to grind that fact into Riki's soul.

Lips fastened around the taut crown of his cock.

His balls trembling in their sack as a tongue trailed along the shaft.

Sucking on him until the muscles buried deep within his creviced flesh twitched and spasmed.

The rewards of his bullheadedness, the cries of sexual satiation rising up as he was given head, his body writhing and moaning... they were collectively the message mercilessly etched onto the core of his being. *You are ashamed of nothing; this is how a pet should behave.*

Two months were required before he would—furrowed eyebrows

and bitten lip notwithstanding—expose himself and bring himself to climax upon command. Three months since he had been brought to Eos. That was the amount of time and effort required to teach Riki the right way to masturbate.

Thinking about the ordeal in those terms, Iason couldn't hold back the smile that rose to his lips. *So this is what slum trash is made of. The pleasure has been all mine.*

During that time, Raoul brought up the topic whenever he and Iason crossed paths.

How goes it with that unkempt monkey of yours?" Raoul asked. "Have you taught him even a single trick?"

"I think even you would find him a handful."

"Because you can't hone abilities that don't exist. Isn't it about time you gave up?"

Raoul never spared the sarcasm. The other Blondies had a good chuckle at Iason's expense as well—but Iason remained calm and unperturbed. Previously, far from some sort of dilettante plaything, Iason had considered pets as attractive interior decor. His new activities were, for him, a change of character.

It took another three months for Iason to complete Riki's training: to make Riki's body sensitive and submissive to every loving caress while his spirit remained as unbroken as ever. There was no more raising his voice or clenching his fists or thrashing about. Riki stopped trying to prevent the furniture from blowing him. Bound by the poisons of shame and pleasure, Riki's resistance was brought under control.

After half a year, Iason took Riki for the first time.

Up until that point, Iason had always faced Riki with his cold, calm demeanor. So why the eventual change? Because he'd suddenly gotten a craving to fuck a slum mongrel? If forced to put it into words, it was something more than a whim of the moment. Perhaps it was the product of Iason's undying curiosity. Or perhaps having

so often slandered Riki as a filthy, wild monkey, and as illiterate, perpetually ignorant trash, Iason Wished to sample the fruit growing out of that swamp.

"Why don't you show me what you can do?"

"With those words, he revealed the perfect symmetry of his beautiful, naked form.

What the hell are you doing? Riki wanted to ask, but was instead struck dumb.

The intimate feel of Iason's taut, warm skin didn't strike Riki as artificial. He gradually felt the stiffness leave his limbs, albeit not completely. There was *this*, and also *that*, and a touch of resistance *here* deserving of redoubled discipline. Obediently accepting pleasures was the duty of the pet, and driving that fact into every corner of a pet's body could be counted as a kind of success.

Iason's foreplay was intense and not in vain. Moreover, it was not without skill. Riki trembled wherever Iason focused his attentions, groaning and arching his back. Iason was thoroughly informed about the sexual arts.

Riki's heart raced as Iason's hand brushed his nipples, sending them to stiffen beneath the pads of Iason's fingers. They hardened as if to a point, pressed between the digits, resulting in an impudent and lewdly suggestive bruise. This massaging of the skin alone set Riki's lips to trembling, and without protest, blood flushed to his groin.

Soft laughter spilled from Iason's mouth. *And yet we've barely begun.*

Iason took the nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue, and Riki's member hardened in Iason's grip, the already moist tip peeking out from Iason's fist. Iason tightened his hold, pumping his hand as he sucked intently on the nipple in his mouth.

Riki surrendered his young, vital body to the ecstasy. Conditioned by such sensations, his flesh only desired more. Even if he loathed it to the point of death, once the stimulation began, his urges could not be restrained. He gasped for air, contorted his body, choked

back the sweet cries. He hyperextended his limbs.

And ejaculated.

His heart pounded in his chest. The semen rushed out, as if ejected by the fiery passions within him, as if marking his endowments as the male of the species. It was a spectacle he had become all too familiar with over the recent months.

And yet—*why*?

Iason was suddenly aware of an unpleasant feeling welling up inside him. It was an incomprehensible loathsomeness he struggled to put into words. But those feelings soon transformed, twisting his lips into a cold, hard smile.

Riki panted, his chest heaving, and licked his lips over and over. Iason noticed this out of the corner of his eye and reached for the nightstand table. There sat a velvet box. Inside it was a ring, glimmering brightly. It was larger than a finger ring, but not as large as a bracelet, and at first glance seemed like a normal platinum band.

Upon closer examination, however, a series of characters was etched along the surface: "Z-107M."

Riki's pet registration number.

Iason took the ring and slipped it onto Riki's limp member.

Riki sat up with a start. He gazed down at his groin and blanched. "Wh-what the hell is *that*?"

"That is your pet ring."

"Pet ring?"

"Yes. Starting today, that will serve in place of your ID".

"But Daryl says a pet ring is a necklace or earring—that kind of thing."

"Those accessories are for ordinary pets that always do as their master instruct. This custom-made D-type ring is the most appropriate for rebellious slum trash."

"What the fuck? Get this thing off me!"

"This is exactly the thing for a foul-mouthed creature that thinks nothing of addressing its owner with such vulgar language."

Iason had ordered the ring especially for Riki. The A-type was a finger ring. The B-type was a necklace. The C-type was an earring. These jewelry pet rings, with their glittering, inlaid gemstones, tickled the fancies of the pets and set them apart from the rest.

But the D-type was different. In all of Eos, Riki was probably the only pet who wore such a custom-made item. Manufactured using the latest in nanotechnology and shape memory alloys, it fastened about the base of Riki's member snugly.

"Son of a *bitch*!" Riki yelped. "Who do you fucking take me for? Get it off!"

Getting Riki to shut up was easily done. Iason calmly twisted a plain-looking ring on his left hand, and in a moment, Riki's complaints were cut off as his body jerked and writhed.

"*Gaaahh!*" he groaned, grabbing his groin with both hands and rolling into a ball as his face twisted with pain.

To drive home the cause and effect, Iason once again touched the ring.

"*Haaahh!*" Riki's lips quivered. "S-stop—" he wept. "*Th-the pain—*"

"This is the kind of punishment the D-type ring can inflict."

Riki's throat spasmed with shock.

"Never forget, Riki. This pet ring will eat into your flesh. And wherever you go, the power is right here in my little finger. A GPS is built in as well. Be the mongrel you are—but give me any backtalk and I can hurt you with the touch of a fingertip. Do you

understand?"

His lower extremities convulsing, Riki nodded.

"Now let go and stretch out your legs."

But Riki's cramped muscles would not allow his legs to part. Iason lowered his voice and whispered into Riki's ear, "I'm not going to ask you a second time."

Riki's body noticeably trembled.

"Spread your legs."

Unaccustomed to the tight, throbbing pain, Riki's body remained stiff as a board. Nevertheless, he awkwardly wrenched his legs apart.

"A little more. A little more. Show me your ring."

His organ lay flaccid, as if trying to hide in his still thin pubic hair. His balls were tucked up inside their shrunken sack. It was easy to see how dramatic a shock had been delivered.

Iason slowly reached out and with his fingertips stroked Riki's ring over and over. A satisfied smile came to his mouth.

Seconds later, Riki was pressing the back of his head against the sheets and bending his body backward, moaning. Iason was already pushing two fingers into him, forcing open the tight, muscled folds, Riki caught his breath, his lower limbs shuddering.

He was taut like a strung bow, the sinews standing out on the flesh, the tight warp of his erection practically touching his stomach. He grasped his organ, lightly thrusting the palm of his hand against the sensitive tip. Riki's body sprung curiously up and down as he moaned and groaned in rising volume and intensity.

"Ah—ahh—ahhh!"

The hard organ in his hand. The blood churning in his veins, rushing through him and increasing the tension of the tight arc of

flesh.

Perhaps with no way to stave off the pleasure creeping like thick, viscous numbness across and around his midsection, the shrill, excited cries spilled continuously from Riki's lips. Without slackening the hold on his testes, Iason lifted them up. The spasming tendons of Riki's inner thighs betrayed the true extent of Riki's ecstasy.

Playing with his testicles, Violating him with strong, rhythmic movements, Iason watched as a convulsing cry rose from Riki's throat. It was more intense, more salacious than any sound Riki had made before. Higher and higher, growling, drawing deep, rasping breaths.

And Riki was pumping himself vigorously with both hands.

But—the hard bow jutted in vain toward the ceiling, with no sign of the final surge. The veins of euphoria stood out on the skin, he was so erect. And yet the ring binding the base of his cock kept him from coming.

"Enough—already! Take—it—of! Give—me—a—fucking—break!"

His whole body heaved as he tried catching his ragged hot breath. He clamped his mouth shut, silencing his larynx, but the lewd screams wouldn't stop breaking from his lips.

He couldn't come, and the rapture was burning his body to cinders. Riki's lips quivered. His hips bucked up and down wildly. He howled. His bright crimson crown twitched, dewy with the first drops of nectar, raw and eager.

When it came to pet sex, Iason was thoroughly bored. He'd had enough of the studs and their animalistic reproductive drives and the flaunting exhibitionism of the bitches.

But he'd never once experienced the erotic fever of this weeping, moaning creature in his arms. Every time Riki arched his back and howled, his ass twitched and fluttered, clamping around Iason's fingers. The nectar dripping from the slender fissure at his crest

soaked Riki's pubic hair and grew into a darkening stain on the sheets.

Iason stared at this fresh, raw innocence. The cold smile had already disappeared from his tight lips, but his eyes burned in their sockets.

What were the tingling urges humming like an electric surge through his head—the ones he had never indulged before now? Iason didn't understand it himself. The only thing he knew was that this slum mongrel, who possessed not an endearing fiber in his body, made Iason's frame tremble.

"Let me come!" Riki begged and moaned, and something more thrummed inside Iason's skull.

Iason slowly shifted his body and grasped Riki's ankles to raise the knees to Riki's chest. Muddily, half-consciously, Riki raised a coy, alluring cry. But had he seen the erect instrument suddenly rising from Iason's groin, his face would have convulsed for different reasons, and his hips would have heaved.

Here was proof that Jupiter had concerned itself even with the details of this physiological mechanism. Everyone knew that the Tanagura elite possessed all the functions of the highest class of sex androids.

Riki was already as flushed and ripe as he could be. But unlike a bitch's supple sexual organs, there was no give with which to swallow up Iason's member. Though aware of this while loosening Riki's ring, Iason ruthlessly penetrated the mongrel.

In that moment, a piercing scream tore from Riki's throat. His face, his limbs, his voice contorted.

His back bowing...

His muscles contracting...

Riki howled.

Thoroughly unfazed, in a single move, Iason rammed himself into

the depths of Riki's body. Deeply joined together, Iason rode Riki hard. Not even a cry could escape Riki's quivering lips. There was only the slight convulsing of his limbs as Iason's pelvis rose and fell, and then Riki's semen spurted out around them.



For the next three days, Riki couldn't even piss standing up without

help. It was so bad that the furniture Daryl, which rarely showed any emotion, twitched its face in sympathy.

That such bungling could be attributed to Iason seemed unthinkable. Aroused to an unexpected degree by Riki's sexuality, he'd lost control of himself. Even if he couldn't *admit* that to himself, he wasn't totally unaware of the fact.

Perhaps I did overindulge a bit.

Furrowing his brow over the sour note on which things had concluded, Iason predictably went back to his everyday life, dealing with things as coolly as he could manage.

But why?

What was going on?

Investigating those questions further and analyzing himself, he did not have enough information for a firm conclusion. However, Iason had certainly not set out to make Riki his sex partner. To start with, he had no reason for doing so.

Or, rather, he *thought* he had no reason for doing so.

Riki evidenced not the slightest degree of dignity or submissiveness appropriate in the pet of a Blondy. Sending Riki off to one of those parties to mate with a bitch would likely prove more mortifying than he could stand. It probably wasn't too late to train Riki properly, but how long would that take? Stud or bitch, Iason didn't wish to mate Riki with either. He thought it was better to sidestep the issue for the time being—he knew well enough the strangeness of the thing he'd brought to Eos.

In the end, Iason escorted Riki to the debut to show off his new pet, but then didn't send Riki to a single sex soiree.

This gave rise to wild speculation; scandalous rumors spread far and wide. But Iason didn't react in the slightest. And that was something his surrounding environment couldn't forgive.

Raoul, naturally, upbraided him severely.

"Iason," he lectured, "send the thing to a soiree. It's been a year since his coming-out, and yet you haven't sent him to a single one. That's made you the target of all these worthless rumors."

"If they are indeed worthless, then what's the harm?"

"Even if you can brush them off, they've made a mess of the moral order in Eos. What do you expect when a Blondy violates the customs?"

"The mating of pets is at the discretion of their owners. There's no law stating that pets must be mated."

"That's why it's called a custom."

"That's not worth complaining about."

"You're the one always complaining about your dimwitted, sex-crazed pets. I'm not saying you have to pair it up—just send it to a soiree. Have it mount some bitch. Or another stud, if that's his fancy. Just get it copulating with the other pets; then at least some of the backbiting will dissipate."

The rumors amused no one more than the elite pet owners. However, their pets were all the more short-tempered, all the more on edge because of it. A Blondy was giving his slum mongrel special treatment. He wouldn't mate it with any of them. He kept his pet to himself and wouldn't let it go.

And Iason was shoving that fact in their faces.

Nothing could be more degrading than coupling with a filthy slum mongrel. And on top of that, being condescended to by that insolent, low-grade pet was more than the rest of the pets could stomach.

Heightening the fury more than anything else, the world they thought was eternal and unchanging was shown to be fragile and untrustworthy. They were afraid. In a heartbeat, all that animosity focused on Riki. His presence was alien in every respect. His existence was impossible for them to accept.

What those pets seized upon in the fury of their hearts—what they rightly understood with all their violent, inner passions—was the extent to which Iason was superior to them all. The ones that ended up keenly experiencing the anger and fear and antagonism of the pets were the eunuchs, neither male nor female—the furniture of Eos.

Such a strange attachment. So unbecoming for a Tanagura Blondy. Such perverse passions.

Iason had first become aware of his attachment to Riki when he had chanced upon Riki jerking off in a sort of trance. In lieu of allowing him to couple with anybody else, Iason looked the other way to permit Riki that personal pleasure. But he didn't allow the furniture to fellate Riki as it had before.

Naked from the waist down, Riki was sprawled on the bed in the middle of the room. His nostrils flaring, his brimming eyes filled with the hologram of a pert, naked bitch—he was so entranced in the act that he didn't take note of Iason's return.

Seeing Riki in such a state, right before his very eyes, Iason furrowed his eyebrows. A strange, unfamiliar, unpleasant sensation welled up in his chest, and there was no way he could withstand it.

With long strides, Iason closed the distance between them. Still completely unaware of him, Riki climaxed with a low moan. A small smile of satisfaction tugged at the corners of his parted lips.

In that moment, as he watched, Iason heard a kind of roaring in his ears, shooting out from the core of his brain.

Grasping the spent Riki by the collar of his shirt, he yanked Riki to his feet with all his strength. Riki was visibly shocked and confused as Iason repeatedly struck his face with the palm of his hand, hard enough to send Riki's face lolling back and forth.

Iason—who always had teasing, abusive words to spare—couldn't get the sounds out of his mouth. Never before had he struck Riki like this.

And yet he did, over and over.

The Tanagura Blondies were known for their cool judgment and abundant knowledge; that was what cultivated their unwavering pride and self-confidence. Standing at the pinnacle, Iason had taken a slum mongrel as a partner and lost himself. Aroused by his own naked anger, he stuck Riki in a blind, reflexive spasm.

All Riki had been doing was pleasuring himself to a naked picture of a bitch. It drove a spike through the heart of his pride as a Blondy, a spike of burning, sexual desire.

The rumors about Riki and Mimea only confirmed the reality of those emotions.

A slum mongrel and an Academy-manufactured love doll. Once, everyone would have laughed off such an unexpected union. It was unbelievable—a bad joke.

But confronted by Raoul, Mimea unexpectedly confirmed its reality. As soon as word spread, the residents of Eos were shocked, whispering amongst themselves with irrepressible curiosity. They were curious about any indications of a growing antagonism between Iason and Raoul. Curious about how the business between Riki and Mimea would be handled.

The fact that Iason treated Riki as something more than an ordinary pet had already become an open secret; that scandal was past. The love bites never faded from Riki's skin. Anybody could tell at a glance that one of the android elites was hot for a slum mongrel.

Understandably, none of the elites—not even Raoul—could begin to understand such unbelievable emotional "irregularities" that under normal conditions would never happen.

This turn of events struck them as the dog biting the hand that fed it. It was the equivalent of Blondy pride being spat upon. With bated breath, Eos anxiously waited for the dust to settle and all the nasty details to sort themselves out.

But contrary to expectations, Iason kept his cool. Riki's

mismanagement was recognized for what it was, apologies were rumored to have been made to Raoul, and that was the end of it. The appropriate punishment had been delivered.

As far as Raoul was concerned, a ready bow of the head was the best he could hope for—aside from a lot of cover-up. The result wasn't the swamp of carnage that everybody had expected. There was no satisfying reveal of secrets to the public.

Of course, Riki—the person at the eye of the storm—and the furniture Daryl—whose ears were filled with Riki's screams—were the only two aware of what was going on.

Mimea had labeled Riki a coward, and Riki hadn't offered a word in his own defense. His guilt over calling the affair a passing infatuation notwithstanding, there was nothing he could do to change anything. Far from it, he flinched in fear from the punishment Iason delivered.

Caught up daily in the violent web of passions between Iason and Riki, Daryl began to go slightly mad.

Iason knew that what he felt toward Mimea was nothing but the darkest jealousy. If he couldn't bear to call it "jealousy" specifically, he could at least acknowledge the wickedness and disgust suffusing his heart—and the knowledge that Riki's existence was something special to him. His desire to monopolize Riki, his helpless sexual attraction toward the mongrel, clung to Iason like a wet garment.

But Iason wasn't about to throw away his identity as a Blondy. That seemed to be the one remaining brake on his behavior. And yet he had not the slightest inclination to cast Riki aside, even to save face among the elites. He made a decision: he'd continue to raise Riki as his special pet and would simply *make* Riki behave.

Flesh and blood in the arms of an android, pet and master... it was an unnatural sight to everyone's eyes—a disaster in the making. It wouldn't last forever. It was only perverse fetters that held them together, and those would eventually burn up and out... and Daryl along with them. In some form that nobody could possibly imagine.

But Iason's reckoning was still some time off.

Chapter 2

The metallic city of Tanagura.

Darkness covered the city; the fantastic, grotesque city that never slept. The monster metropolis of the once impoverished star system of Amoy now intimidated even the Commonwealth. It was a city that knew no difference between day and night, that did not draw a breath that was not timed to the fraction of a second. It permitted nothing unpredictable within its precincts, as if the abuse of time itself was reserved as the sweetest of joys.

Tanagura was exquisite. Huge in scale and yet governed with a functional aestheticism free of excess, its appearance alone radiated overwhelming power.

However, reigning in its own right was Midas, warring with Tanagura at the opposite extreme of "beauty." Between the two was an unbridgeable abyss.

The outskirts of Tanagura. Midas Area 3. Mistral Park. Twelve-thirty at night.

Kirie waited within a high-class guest suite perched above the cluster of buildings. Outside the window, the headlights and taillights of the air cars flashed their beams across the gloomy darkness.

"So this is Tanagura," Kirie muttered. "What a fucking big place." He was impressed. The endless expanse of the night opened up before his eyes. "Makes all that Midas neon look like kid's stuff. I guess no matter how high you climb, there's always somebody looking down on you."

In a different place and time, another slum mongrel had once uttered that exact same sentiment Kirie couldn't have said whether that constituted a good or evil omen.

He was in a large room surrounded by ivory walls and thick carpets. The white enhanced the dark blue cast of the furnishings, and

imparted a sense of luxury to the space. Every inch of the enclosure was suffused with a clean, antiseptic aura, and a pleasing silence filled the room.

There was still some time until their appointment... but Kirie had come early in anticipation of a visit from *him*. Although Kirie wished for more frequent contact, there was no way he could pull it off from his end. The calls were curt and one-way. All Kirie had to cling to were these scant threads that could be severed at any moment.

Coming all the way here to receive the long-awaited communiqué left Kirie with an airy sense of exaltation. A feeling of achievement welled up inside him. And yet...

As the time crept by, Kirie inevitably took notice of the puny dimensions of his own existence. As if to suddenly avert his gaze from this reality, he breathed a small sigh. Accustomed only to the filthy, drab streets of the Ceres colony, every image reflected in his eyes became another seduction.

This was the place where he belonged. Kirie was acutely cognizant of the fact. But when he directed his attention to the window opposite, he found the glittering face of a more familiar night. Cheerful illuminations dyed the darkness, and the Pleasure Quarters shamelessly flaunted itself as usual. The well-accustomed gaudiness of Midas remained an exceptional sight, its gleaming brilliance staying with him, for some reason.

Fuck all, I need a good stout.

Kirie dreamily narrowed his eyes. This was the third time he'd stood before the windows in this skyscraper, looking down at the lights of Midas. The designated location for the meeting was different from before, but the twinkling neon forest below him continued to dazzle and bewitch.

The first time he'd seen the whirlpools of light never visible from Ceres, Kirie had been struck dumb by the overwhelming spectacle before him. He had never come in contact with such magnificent beauty. It made his heart race and burn in his chest. His first true

culture shock left him breathless; he still recalled the tremendous excitement that had made him quake.

But the second time, the captivating beauties of Midas reaching into the distance only irritated him. He could see the vast differences that separated his native Ceres from Midas, and the disparity filled him with rage.

Why only us? he wondered. *Why are we relegated to worthless lives as mongrel scum?* He couldn't keep the thoughts from his mind. But, still, his convictions wavered suspiciously.

Never before had he so badly desired to crawl out of the slums. There were beams of light that offered the allure of a different world, a world apart from the stifling life he knew. The inferiority complex born of being a slum mongrel would never be expunged—but Kirie's chest burned with the painful desire to at least try. Soon, he would rise in the world! Fiercely, unremittingly, that desire penetrated Kirie's mind.

A voice called out, catching him off guard. "Thank you for waiting."

The daydreaming Kirie froze on the spot. The low, cool voice jerked him back to reality in resounding tones that somehow set him at ease. As his heartbeat calmed, Kirie slowly turned his gaze in the direction of the voice.

There in front of him was a graceful, composed, and attractive countenance that only seemed to draw him closer. The beautiful, eye-catching attire, different from their previous meetings, made Kirie's heart thump again. This was a Tanagura elite. This was Iason Mink.

"You're welcome." Kirie bowed his head unasked. It was as if Iason's dignity and authority left him no other option. Before his eyes stood the kind of nobility that under ordinary circumstances would never acknowledge his existence.

"Any further developments since last time?" Iason walked elegantly to the sofa and sank into it.

"Ah, no—"

The first words out of Kirie's mouth were unnaturally hoarse. *Get a grip!* He Clucked his tongue and scolded himself, licking his parched lips. "A lot of wild speculation, lots of confusion. Talk about something fishy going on—"

Iason unexpectedly smiled. It was thin, employing just the corners of his mouth. It added something more to the terrible allure of his beautifully malicious face. Struck by the force of such an unfathomable physical charm, Kirie swallowed hard.

"I see. I shouldn't have expected this to be easy." "

"Of course not. I have to be careful."

Iason didn't reprimand Kirie for speaking so bluntly out of turn; this led Kirie to fancy that he enjoyed special privileges with the Blondy. He let his expectations climb a little higher, but kept his ego in check. He wasn't about to let his opportunity slip away.

"No, I guess he wouldn't have been won over so easily. I guess he hasn't lost all of his basic instincts."

He'd been second in command of the slum's strongest gang, but that was old news. With this big of a story on the streets, fear was sure to overtake the city before things spun out of control. Kirie didn't doubt it in the slightest.

There was one man among the original Bison members he hadn't won over, though. This man carried on as if he didn't care, and Kirie was oblivious to the ill will he bore him in turn.

"I have no complaints thus far. But what is the reality on the ground? Can you still feel a pulse?"

"Not for long." Kirie spoke with conviction. "Everybody wants out of the slums—they just don't have it in 'em to take the first step." And thus nobody in the slums was stupid enough to throw away a ticket to paradise. "A little more time and I'll seal the deal. The only problem is *him*."

"Him?" queried Iason, with a sudden flash of interest.

Kirie clucked his tongue in a show of exasperation. "The black-haired kid who used to hang with Guy. Always dropping hints and planting ideas on the sly. He fucking had it in for me 'cause I didn't hang off his every word."

"You mean to say you weren't true friends?" Iason said with a touch of laughter in his voice. It suggested that a thin current of warm blood still flowed in his veins, despite his coolly handsome features.

Kirie's eyes briefly widened in surprise. "It's not really funny. This was before your time, but the word is those two were paired up."

"Paired up?" The tone of Iason's voice abruptly shifted.

Shit, I shouldn't have let that slip out. "At any rate," Kirie added a bit too quickly, "over and done with now."

"But they *were* a couple, you say? A partner like that...?"

"Nothing unusual about it in the slums. There's hardly a woman to be found there, y'know."

"Yes. Nine to one, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Women only give birth to guys here. That's why the Midas harems give 'em the red carpet treatment. The slums stink with horny guys who are never gonna be with better than an old hag."

"A woman being a rare commodity, I would think the men would take whatever they could get, even if it was old and well used."

"But if you're gonna do it with a female, you want her young and tight."

Kirie tossed off the line with a world-weary air. The fact was, he'd never even seen a dried-up old hag. In the slums, the chance to connect with the rare breed that was the female sex came possibly once in a lifetime. Kirie knew only the incoherent wisdom dispensed by drunks in bars.

But Kirie still had one or two points of wisdom he wished to share, even if that knowledge amounted to nothing in the real world. If nothing else, he wanted to leave Iason with the impression that he was more than a stupid child.

"Everybody knows there's a shortage of women," Kirie added. "They ought to be using artificial insemination. Men and women are born in Midas using artificial wombs, right? Natural birth is a fucking relic."

"Ceres is known for its unyielding principles. Taking the first step away from a deeply rooted tradition requires enormous energy and causes great suffering."

"Yeah, well, Ceres can cram its principles. *We've* got no money, no dreams. On top of that, there's no young snatch in sight. We pretty much have no reason to live. What do you blue bloods know about suffering?"

Iason's only response was a fetchingly thin smile that dimpled one cheek.

"Even if you get yourself a sex change and turn yourself into some hot babe," Kirie continued, "that still doesn't mean you've made it. In the end, everybody hooks up with whoever's closest and available."

"I suppose you take what you can get in the slums. And as for yourself?"

"I don't sell myself cheap. I got my principles." As he spoke, Kirie flashed a glance at Iason with upturned eyes, as if in solicitation. *You want to try taming me?*

But as before, Iason merely looked back and implied nothing with his gaze.

Kirie lowered his eyes, his expression self-deprecating as he colored slightly. When Iason told the story, why was it about Guy? Why wasn't it about Kirie? It was embarrassing. Kirie was both better-looking and younger than Guy.

So why?

But Guy had something Kirie didn't—a past in Bison with Riki. Kirie knew he was reaching for something that would always be out of his grasp, and that made him feel out of place. It left a bad taste in his mouth.

"You know," Kirie said, "you're not so normal. You said it yourself; slum mongrels are nothing but worthless punks with their screws loose. You can't say much good about us. For elites like you, anything but an Academy-bred pet isn't worth it, right?"

Kirie deliberately used the language of the slums. Posing at this point wouldn't fool Iason, so he instead spoke proudly; he preferred to play up his mongrel heritage than pretend to be something he wasn't just to kiss ass.

That simplistic purity was Kirie's redeeming virtue. "I guess it's all a matter of taste," Iason said with a small smile, deflecting the questions Kirie threw at him.

Why would a Blondy be interested in a slum mongrel? It was only natural that Kirie was dying to know. But Kirie hesitated from pressing the matter further. If he asked too many questions, or refused to take no for an answer, he might find himself on Iason's bad side. Fear held his tongue.

As far as Kirie was concerned, running into Iason that day in Mistral Park amidst the teeming crowds was his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He knew his chances were thin, but he'd had an encounter with a Blondy, and that had opened up a new world to him—for better or for worse. Kirie had never had such an opportunity before. Simply waiting for life to begin guaranteed that it never would. But he didn't have the slightest idea about where he was heading, and his frustration grew.

Still, the encounter with Iason had given him something to live for, so Kirie clung tenaciously to the thin, uncertain threads Iason offered him. He asked for little and watched every step along the way. A man crawling out of the slums couldn't afford to take big risks, after all. But despite Kirie's own precautions about how far to

push and when, it was Iason who set aside his prejudices about slum mongrels and led Kirie into the business.

In the slums, Kirie was a rat who sold out his friends to the android bastards and pocketed the profits. Kirie didn't care if they called him names—they were just jealous of the money he was making, and they barked like whining dogs. They weren't worth a second thought.

It's not the strongest fighter who ends up on top; it's the smartest. Only fools and nobodies grumble about their loss. Sid had said that once, and Kirie was since living it.

Bison had broken apart when they were at the top. What was left couldn't even whip the shitty upstart Jeeks. How the mighty had fallen.

Kirie couldn't believe he'd ever admired Riki when he'd been the leader of Bison—he was a coward who turned his stomach. Kirie wasn't the same boy who'd once picked through Bison's scraps. To prove that to Riki and everyone else, he'd flushed the runts out of the Jeeks safe house with a tear gas bomb to teach the little shits a thing or two. At this juncture, they were barely worth his time. His true measure as a man was yet to come, but he still knew that he had what it took.

How do you like that, huh? That's the kind of power I have now. You're nothing but trash. A new tradition begins with me, and things are gonna be different.

He could pull off any job, no matter what, if given the chance. And he'd had so much bad luck already that things could only get better. As long as he kept those thoughts foremost in his mind, his confidence never faltered.

He wasn't arrogant enough to believe that he enjoyed Iason's full confidence. But the Blondy didn't seem to despise him. For the time being, Kirie told himself that that was enough. He understood the one condition that governed the connection between them:

Don't ask, don't tell.

After that, Kirie got up and left. Iason had only managed to find ten minutes in his otherwise packed schedule, but Kirie counted that much time alone with the Blondy as a solid win.

Iason watched Kirie's retreating figure until he disappeared. He laughed to himself. The boy was holding an empty hand and bluffing as best he could. Though he came from the same slums, the difference in character was remarkable.

Running errands is about all this one is good for. The cruel, cold smile reflected his doubt in ever laying eyes on Kirie again. But—such things were always hard to say.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Raoul's voice.

"Am I early?" Raoul asked. Though he tried to mask it with a curt tone of voice, the smile in his eyes betrayed his deep curiosity. He must have passed Kirie on the way in.

A wry smile came to Iason's lips. "Not really. Certainly nothing you need to tiptoe around."

"Is that so? I seemed to catch the whiff of people furtively up to no good."

"You're imagining things."

"I thought you didn't have the time to pick up slum mongrels these days."

The serrated edge of sarcasm in Raoul's statement didn't disturb Iason's demeanor. "Why don't you take one out for a test drive, Raoul? You might like it.

"Unlike you," Raoul said casually as he sat on the sofa, "dumpster diving doesn't suit my palate. A carefully groomed Midas pet has more to offer than taming some wild mongrel. I'd rather analyze viruses with an ancient seaming electron microscope."

Raoul Hamm was one of Tanagura's biotechnology specialists. The

hardheaded Commonwealth bureaucrats—and especially those calling themselves "religionists"—referred to him as a mad scientist who didn't even fear God.

According to Raoul, the mysteries of life were no longer the province of God. He preferred that which could be scientifically proven. If he really was a mad scientist, then at least he wasn't as bad as those who led their fellow man astray in the name of God. While Raoul was not one to pick fights heedlessly, this one mattered and needed to be answered in full.

"But you needn't take this as anything more than the expression of my needless fears. Interrupting your busy schedule to arrange meetings with mongrels makes me think you're getting into bad habits again. Why do you persist in doing the forbidden? Do you enjoy it?" Raoul's voice was heavy with implicit understanding.

"It's nothing like the first time."

"But you have a taste for it now?"

"What's this?" Iason countered softly. "Why all the sudden interest?"

Raoul shrugged "There is an odd rumor coming to my attention about a man in the slums that looks just like *him*."

"Stands to reason. It *is* him. That's awfully old news, though—it's been almost a year since I first heard it."

The smile vanished from Raoul's face. "That's not funny, Iason. Pets must be disposed of and sold in Midas. You can't ignore such regulations."

"You've never broken the rules? All I did was remove his ring. He just needed a little freedom."

"Removing the ring only serves to expunge his registration records. There are no exceptions."

"He's a slum mongrel. He doesn't even have a Midas PAM registration. Pet Law only concerns Midas-bred pets. What's the problem with removing the creature's ring and returning him to the

slums?"

As Iason made his case, Raoul couldn't find the words to reply. More than his devil-may-care attitude, it was Iason's twisting of Pet Law for his own purposes that unsettled Raoul.

"With no external controls, and no psychological imprinting in play, I took in a slum mongrel and spent three years training him. Three years, Raoul! After all that, do you really expect me to throw him away?"

"So you really haven't purged his pet registration data?"

"Of course not! I removed his pet ring to give him some space. He's a stubbornly rebellious slum mongrel; keeping him shackled day and night would only suffocate him."

Raoul leaned back, emitting a hoarse moan. His face grew all the more fierce. "I thought you'd learned your lesson after what happened"

Iason's eyes narrowed slightly as he recalled the scandal from the year before. The so-called "Daryl incident." Iason's furniture had hacked the security network and allowed Riki to escape. *Eos security was hacked by a piece of furniture*. That alone was a serious blow that rocked the confidence of the elite as a whole.

But even at the time, Iason had reacted to the agitated state of affairs in Eos with his customary cool. Though accepting responsibility for his role in the matter, he squared things away as logically and dispassionately as possible.

Raoul could still remember every detail.

That day, Iason was working in the Eos security room. The safeguards imposed there were as tight as any other setting in Tanagura. He'd just finished up a task when Raoul had invited him to a private lunch and there broached the subject: "That thing of yours is still misbehaving."

A smile twitched one side of Iason's face. "What long ears you have, Raoul. Weren't you in Keeler's lab until yesterday?"

"And I came back to find Eos in an uproar. Of course I took immediate notice. What was it this time?"

"He shook off his security detail and made it outside Eos," Iason related in a blank tone of voice.

But even Raoul—who'd long ago written off Riki's behavior as the product of bad training—was startled by the new trouble.

"I thought you tamed him after that whole business with Mimea. But he's as recalcitrant as ever; after all this time, he's still living up to his slum mongrel reputation."

"You've just gotten back and you're already laughing at me. Why are you so put out whenever Riki's name comes up?"

"I don't care for him," Raoul spit out, harrowing his brow. "I can't stand to see trash make you look like a fool."

Over the past three years, no matter what ill-tempered remark Raoul could make, Iason's resolve hadn't changed in the slightest. "Is that all you came here to say?"

"I take it he was arrested?"

"Naturally. He couldn't have actually gotten away. The pet ring saw to that."

And only your idiot pet would pull such a stunt while wearing a D-type ring with an embedded GPS. Such tenaciously deviant behavior placed Riki well beyond the limits of Raoul's understanding.

"He did get as far as Prage, though. Everybody was quite impressed." Iason let out a dramatic sigh. For some reason he appeared quite pleased with himself.

As far as Raoul was concerned, this was more evidence of bad taste. "Stop smirking, Iason. Your pet broke through Eos security and made a run for it. Nobody's laughing. He should be punished."

Raoul spoke with a particularly unpleasant tone of voice, but Iason took no notice. "Don't say things like that," Iason replied. "Thanks to him, we've uncovered a back door in the supposedly flawless Eos security protocols. Think about how much worse this could have turned out."

Raoul let out a long breath. "You come out of every disaster without a mark, Iason. You'll twist any set of facts to fit your purpose."

Iason didn't betray even the slightest indication of the pressure bearing down on him as Riki's guardian. At times like this, Raoul was amazed by Iason's ability to so thoroughly turn the tables with his own arguments.

"I just take things as they come. If I couldn't manage that, I wouldn't be qualified to run the markets."

"But can the feared Ice Man handle an unruly pet?"

Raoul had used that line far too many times, and it was starting to wear on Iason. Why couldn't Raoul act like the other Blondies and look on from the sidelines?

"I have no desire to debate with you about Riki anymore," Iason said, injecting an additional air of coolness into his voice, stating without words that some things were nonnegotiable.

"But can you really let things slide this time? This isn't just about a run-in between a pet and security. Hacking the system is an actual crime."

"There is no way a mere pet could access a secure terminal and do anything. And if a pet *could* do such a thing, far more detailed security needs to be worked out and executed."

"That pet of yours has more cunning and guile than it needs."

Indeed, when it came to cunning and guile, Riki's IQ was off the charts. Some would blame it on his education at Guardian. But considering that all mongrels were thrown into that decrepit environment and forced to survive by the age of thirteen, perhaps his wiles were hardly anything to boast about in comparison. A

high IQ did not necessarily add up to a sharp mind.

Without a doubt, Riki had the brains to run a first-rate criminal organization. His utterly graceless arrogance remained unchanged, but the education Iason had lavished on him made those qualities all the more apparent.

Raoul wanted to believe that Iason had simply brought rough material to Eos in order to prove he could polish a stone into a jewel... but perhaps Iason was merely showing Riki off with a mocking and derisive smile. The thing had evil in its eyes and appalling taste in clothing. It was unimaginable for any other Blondy pet. Parading the thing around on a leash only made it clear to anyone the differences between it and the other pets.

Having accustomed themselves to the feeble-mindedness of the pet population, this struck the elites as a complete perversity. The cries of shock and surprise erupted all over again. They took such offense to this unique quality of Iason's pet that their original uproar over Riki's origins was drowned out.

Still, they were fascinated by the creature, and couldn't tear their eyes away from it. It was Iason's pet, and it was such a delinquent. They claimed that that was why they followed its every action.

"And then there's this business about it working with the furniture," Raoul said. "You need to deal with that promptly."

"Who do you think you're talking to? I won't look the other way when it comes to such matters."

"Sorry," Raoul replied in an offhand manner. "Of course I didn't mean to suggest otherwise."

Iason was finished with Raoul. But the conversation had clearly upset Iason, as he wore a fierce expression on his face.

Iason wasn't so forgiving that he could overlook as serious a crime as hacking the system. As promised, he sentenced the piece of furniture called Daryl to death. In addition, Iason finally gave up

Riki for being equally implicated in the crime and the cause of so much trouble. Riki was disposed of.

Or so Raoul and many relieved residents of Eos believed. With one stroke, the infection had at last been purged. Eos could return to its normal, peaceful ways.

Iason had been attending the more recent Midas auctions with increasing frequency. The consensus was that he was shopping for a new pet. Naturally, this became the new focus of attention in Eos. But when people heard rumors that Iason was employing another slum mongrel in search of new experiences...

He never learns, they told each other with knowing laughter.

Then there was the unexpected rumor that a man resembling Riki had turned up in the slums. Raoul had been shocked. Surely Iason wouldn't go that far.

Nevertheless, he couldn't expunge the doubts from his mind. In order to see for himself, Raoul's investigations took him to Mistral Park. But before he could be sure, Iason readily confirmed the truth. Raoul had been further aggravated when Iason had twisted the meaning of Pet Law to suit his needs.

"I gave him a 'breather' for a year," Iason explained. "Let him run around free for a while. A generous time limit, I believed. I didn't realize he'd go back to the way he was before. But since he has, bringing him back here was the only responsible thing I could do as his owner, don't you agree?" Iason flashed a charming smile.

Raoul hadn't the slightest idea what was going through Iason's mind. "What do you intend to do with the thing?"

"Nothing, really. I'm just curious how he'll react given the choice between his old pairing partner and his pride. That's all."

"He's nothing but a slum mongrel. It isn't like you to take something this seriously."

"Isn't like me?" Iason looked down and drew a deep breath. "If he was nothing but a pet, I wouldn't have spent three years keeping

him on a short leash. I may have been acting on a whim at the start, but I became engrossed to an unexpected degree. Especially after that business with Mimea. Only my brain is organic, but that still makes me merely human in the end."

Raoul liked to boast that at the end of the day, no mysteries lurked within the eternal truths of the universe. But now his eyes widened with surprise. As far as Raoul was concerned, Iason's mind was a greater puzzle than all the hidden secrets of the cosmos.

"If I said that I—that I *loved* Riki, you'd probably laugh. Wouldn't you, Raoul?"

Raoul was so disturbed by the words coming out of Iason's mouth that he was rendered speechless. He couldn't decide whether to deflect this startling confession with laughter or a flippant expletive.

Iason cast a sidelong glance at Raoul, a sardonic smile twisting his features. He was struggling with a dilemma arising out of emotions at odds with his pride as a Blondy. To clear his head for a moment, Iason leaned back, picturing the complicated days to come.

A year ago, on the day when Riki had been apprehended at Prage, Daryl was brought to a separate holding cell at the security center. Daryl showed no inclination to flee or resist. The look on his face was that of unusual meekness. Upon closer inspection, though, it was a look Iason had never seen before—perhaps one of confident satisfaction.

"Do you understand why you've been brought here, Daryl?"

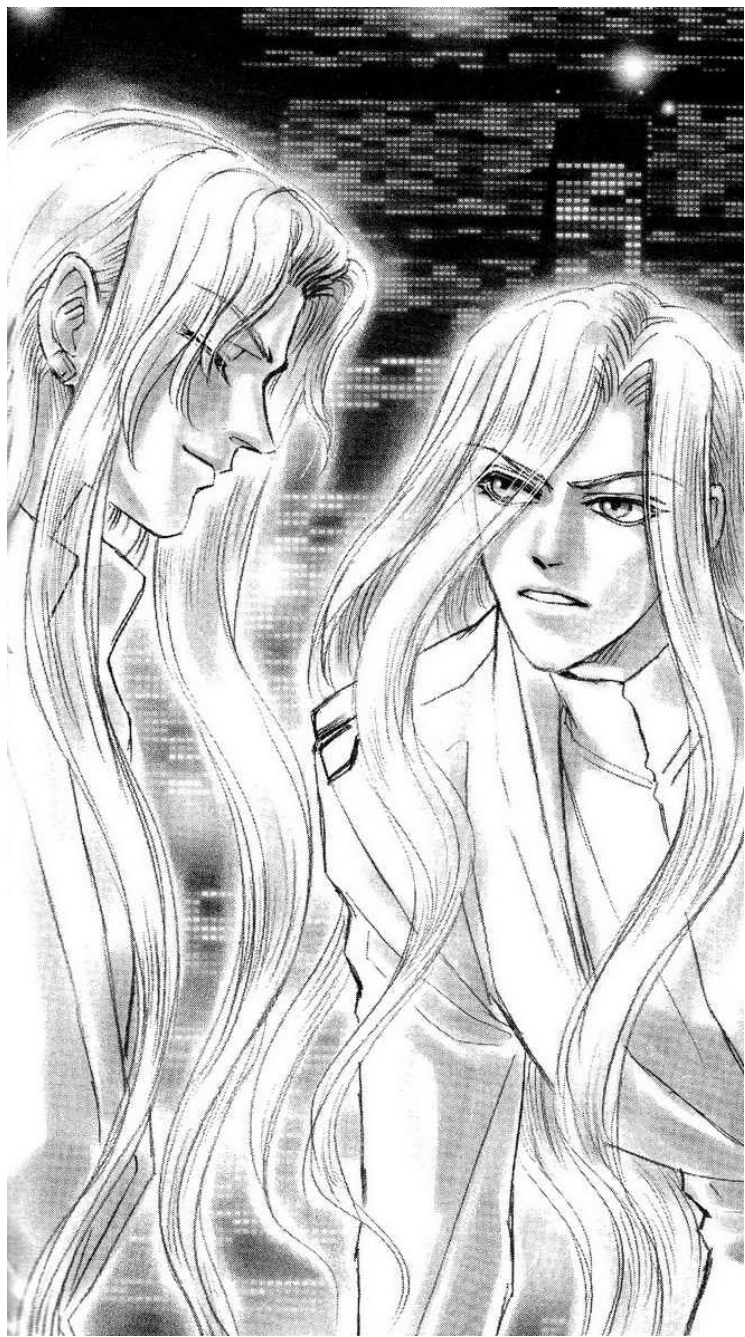
"How is Master Riki? What's become of him?" Daryl asked, ignoring Iason's question.

"He was apprehended at Prage."

Daryl's eyes quivered after a moment. Iason could hardly believe it. Had Daryl honestly believed that Riki would escape? A cloud covered Daryl's face, a reflection of the stupidity he now regretted.

It's too late for such regrets. Iason, of course, couldn't fail to notice how those words came back to him cloaked with derision and criticism.

"Riki is in a holding cell right now. He was hard to handle, so he was given some sedatives."



"He isn't hurt, is he?"

"The Eos security details are trained to apprehend pets without inflicting any undue damage."

Daryl visibly sighed with relief.

In actuality, Riki had put up more of a struggle than expected, and had been hurt about as much as he'd hurt security. But there was no need to tell Daryl that. It wasn't an act of human kindness, but it was simply because the worry would do neither of them any good.

"So tell me—why would he have taken on such a feebleminded accomplice?"

Daryl raised his lowered eyes and said in a clear and distinct voice, "No. This was my idea. Master Riki knew nothing about it."

"He threatened you and you were helpless to resist. Say that and things will go easier for you."

But Daryl refused the easy out. "I'm the one responsible for hacking the pet security system. I wasn't ordered to and I wasn't threatened."

In a sense, Iason was satisfied to see Daryl being so brave. But at the same time, what Daryl said tore at unpleasant emotions deep within his heart.

"Why?" Iason asked again.

"Because Riki was obsessed with those doors," Daryl answered simply and clearly.

Iason quickly deduced that Daryl was referring to the doors in the main lobby of Eos. It was the only connection between Eos and the outside world. Now and then, Riki would go down to the lobby to simply fix his gaze on those doors. He'd glare at those doors, not moving a muscle, until the security guard dragged him back to his quarters. It had happened often enough that it was hardly worth mentioning. Without saying a word, the thoughts going through his mind were as plain as the nose on his face: *Some day this pet ring is coming off and I'm going through those doors.*

Passing through the door and into the outside world had never

crossed the mind of any pet other than Riki. Walking through the door meant the deletion of their registration records as they headed to the scrap heap. Only Riki was perverse enough to long for any other place.

"He was raised in the same cage as yourself. Are you saying that you felt sorry for the state he was in?"

"No. I only—"

"You shouldn't be particularly dissatisfied with your status as the furniture of a Blondy. The punishment for hacking is severe. You must have been aware of that. So why do it?"

Iason needed to know. How could this furniture—that should have been unfailingly faithful to him—do something so stupid? What was Daryl thinking? What had those eyes seen?

"Did Master Iason not notice? Recently, Master Riki hasn't been very talkative. After sleeping with Master Iason, a fever stayed with him. It was taking its toll."

Iason had noticed, although he'd pretended not to. "Nothing turned up in his medical exams. Over the past three years, nothing has shown up in his checkups. The doctors credit that to your attentiveness."

It was no exaggeration—when it came to looking after Riki's health, Daryl was more attentive than most furniture. His sense of obligation as furniture alone couldn't account for it. No matter how much Riki's temper raged, Daryl wouldn't back down.

Being stubborn and irritable were Riki's strong suits, but Daryl had patience and perseverance to match. The weight of Daryl's reasoning silenced him. That had become the repeating pattern for two years.

But while he held his tongue, his eyes showed a complex range of emotions. Riki saw something in Daryl, something that even Iason couldn't grasp. It was something more than simply growing familiar with his face. Iason had never before observed between pet and

furniture the sense of distance maintained between those two without it leading to some sort of feud.

"Master Riki said it's nothing, but I don't think that's the case."

"You aren't a doctor. You're only furniture, Daryl." Iason drove the point home with his typical nonchalant directness.

"I don't know what kind of life Master Riki lived in the slums, but I know what Master Riki was like when he was at Guardian."

Not a flicker of emotion showed on Iason's face in reaction to the startling revelation. It wasn't impossible. The furniture in Eos was all supplied by Guardian, a secret known by only a handful of the elites. It was why Iason wasn't particularly surprised to learn that Daryl and Riki might have crossed paths before.

"How much older are you?"

"Three years. But we were assigned to different blocks."

Guardian was scrupulous about differentiating education by block. Children assigned to separate blocks would rarely if ever have the chance to intermingle. Add to that a three year gap, and the odds of getting to know each other were slim.

And yet Daryl said he knew Riki from Guardian. Before Iason could ask how, Daryl readily supplied the answer. "Though we were assigned to separate blocks, most of the furniture here remembers Riki."

"Riki doesn't know any of you," Iason said. He could tell Riki wasn't pretending to not know the other furniture. They *were* strangers to him.

"But we knew him. The black-haired, black-eyed Riki was hard to miss. It was like some strange alien thing had descended on Guardian. Riki had a different nature from the rest of us. He didn't get close to anybody. People said he didn't even remember his own block mates. But being Riki, it was no surprise to any of us."

"Like now?"

"Yes. He didn't curry favor with anybody about anything. No matter what happened, he never changed who he was. That was why, whenever our monthly free time rolled around, we would compete with each other to catch a glimpse of the problem child the Sisters didn't know how to deal with. And when one of us did we would never forget it. He was so unusual."

"He does stand out, even now." Iason could almost picture Riki at Guardian.

"He hasn't changed a bit. Even if bound by a leash, he would rather live his life as a slum mongrel than be reduced to the life of a pet. That's why I envy him, and suffer for him. Being able to do nothing but look on and wonder, he becomes an all the more painful sight."

To some degree, Iason could see Daryl's point. Having the same Riki before his very eyes, it was not difficult to imagine the disquiet in Daryl's thoughts. Nor to mention the fact that Iason had ordered Daryl to fellate Riki.

Daryl, you will teach this slum trash with your month what all this futile struggle will achieve. Enjoy yourself, but don't let him come. I shall deliver the final stroke.

Furniture were obligated to obey their masters. That was the one rule to ensure their continued existence in Eos. Suppressing a pained look, Daryl had buried his face between the thighs of the struggling slum mongrel, sucking on what he could never have.

The humiliation notwithstanding, Daryl serviced Riki in a disinterested, straightforward manner. Except for one time. One time, Daryl's emotions broke free.

It was when Riki was resisting Daryl's oral ministrations as usual, abusing him with whatever language his mind could muster. But then Riki said or did something that touched Daryl's sense of the forbidden. Unexpectedly, Daryl had flown into a rage.

You're furniture, Daryl. Remember your place.

Iason had scolded Daryl gently, and that had kept Daryl from

hitting Riki. Having to rebuke that action meant Iason had overestimated Daryl's value as furniture.

Pets were simpleminded nymphomaniacs—it was how they were raised. But having equally simpleminded furniture would prove problematic. On this point alone, Daryl was actually quite exemplary. Iason couldn't help but admire Daryl for having the drive and the mental facilities to hack the security system.

"If Master Riki gave in, he could be happy. But when I think about the way Master Riki used to be, I envy him so much it makes my chest hurt. Unless I can rid myself of this jealousy, I can't function as furniture, and yet..." Daryl's voice caught as he struggled to choke out the words. "... That's why I won't curry favor with anybody, I can't stand the thought of Master Riki turning into anything but what he used to be. That's why..."

"You wanted to see if he had any pride left, or whether he'd been reduced to nothing more than a pet?"

Daryl's only reply was to stare back at Iason.

"For that purpose alone, you're willing to sentence perfectly good Blondy furniture to being thrown in the trash?"

Iason felt that the action had been foolish, but that was the worst he could call it since he empathized with Daryl's plight. He was surprised that he found himself thinking such things about *furniture*. He had to pause a moment to recollect his thoughts.

"In Eos," Daryl replied, "furniture is a disposable good. We're subject to a pet's whims and fits of violence—Isn't that why furniture suffer such short life spans?"

"For five years, you've done nothing to offend your position as furniture. Is Riki worth so much that you're willing to throw your life away?"

"Master Riki is not a disposable good like me. He treated me as another human being. It's true that he never spoke to me gently or tried to win my affections; I never even saw the desire to do so in

his eyes. But he didn't scorn me as other pets have. Perhaps I've become a little full of myself, but I still want to do something for him. Just so that for a moment, we could share something—I couldn't ask for anything more."

"You're telling me that you would rather be like a slum mongrel?"

For a moment, an expression of joyful sadness rose to Daryl's face. He just as quickly composed himself again.

"It was the first and last gamble I made, with the fate of Master Riki and your pride in the balance. So I naturally offer everything I possess as collateral. Nothing could bring me more happiness than Master Riki being made whole again."

"Riki would not be happy to hear about your sacrifice." The words rose abruptly to Iason's lips, turning down the corners of his mouth. Indeed, Riki would grieve over what Daryl had done. He wouldn't cry for himself, but he would surely feel responsible for Daryl's fate, and the memory would be buried in his heart in personal atonement for the death.

Iason couldn't allow that. Nobody could be carved into Riki's heart except Iason.

Daryl looked at Iason with wide eyes. "This is entirely my fault, so have mercy on Master Riki. Please—I beg of you."

"If you are to take all the blame and spare Riki, you realize that no discipline is off the table as far as *you* are concerned."

"Yes."

"In that case, you shall serve as an example to all of Eos of what misery awaits those who commit such a serious offense."

Even saying this, Daryl showed no regrets. He only turned to Iason and bowed his head.

Every now and then the creatures of the slums did surprising things—it was what his time with Katze had taught him. People evolved according to their environments, out of self-preservation, as a

product of desire, or even as a result of despair. But one thing about them never changed.

They could always surprise you.

Iason Mink was one of the elite aristocrats chosen by Jupiter to be the backbone of Tanagura. He was a new type of man who had risen out of Jupiter's sense of self. For a long time, Iason had lived with a sense of pride and loyalty from the collective will he shared with his creator. Because of this, he had an unwavering conviction that his existence surpassed that of other mortals. Before he met Riki, he never doubted that his mind remained uncontaminated by the human emotions that haunted those beings of flesh and blood.

He believed that the continued existence of that deformed child Midas was necessary to show off the splendors of Tanagura. The breeding and disposing of human beings as pets was a reflection of the dignity and majesty of the elite. They were only doing their duty.

But then he met Riki, and those convictions crumbled.

Before Riki, Iason felt that breeds like the slum mongrels were trash with no hope of a respectable future. But the lively, vibrant movement of Riki's limbs pleased the eye. The heat of his body, accepting all the pleasures offered, impressed on Iason the special right of the flesh and blood descendents of the human race. On top of that, Riki had a sense of insubordinate pride that led him into trouble. His precious, pearl black eyes revealed every emotion without compromise.

Iason felt the full impact of what it meant to grow up without behavioral conditioning or educational programming. Whenever Riki filled his view, Iason tasted a renewed sense of irritation, a fresh sense of surprise. He felt warm tendrils deep within him snake through his body.

As an android bioengineered from the distilled essence of a biological brain, Iason knew that he shouldn't be experiencing that.

But the faint pulse of something called "emotion" would not disappear. It had carved itself into his mind. That which should not be there throbbed like a phantom pain.

The emotions were so raw that they aroused a feeling of disgust in him. A fever rose out of surreptitious and often incomprehensible sensations and scalded his soul. It made him question his reason for being a member of the Tanagura elite, and he doubted his pride as a Blondy.

Entwined by the tingling eddies of numbness, at times he felt a hunger that reason could not contain. Did he want Riki more than he could bear? *Is there one among us who wouldn't envy such a glittering soul?*

Roaring with anger and denying everything was easy—but Iason had opened a door he could no longer shut. His impulses killed reason. Iason was already aware that somewhere within him, however faintly, he had been endowed with the instincts of an ordinary human.

Chapter 3

Ceres. Four-thirty in the afternoon.

At that time of year, the cold gusts of wind sweeping along Cuzco Avenue drove tiny needles into the skin. The wind fluttered the hem of a man's long winter coat as he strolled along, a cigarette clenched between his teeth.

He didn't have the recognizable gait of a slum resident. If anything, a sense of loneliness and strain seemed to cling to the back of his thin frame. To those accustomed to the muddy, stagnant atmosphere, the foreignness of the man was obvious.

As he passed by, the bystanders opened their eyes a little wider and then quickly looked away. Something about him was very different. The world he inhabited was not their own. Loath to get involved, they left the scene as soon as possible... and, according to his unchanged gait, the man didn't care.

There was a section in Ceres where repeated assault on the buildings had shattered their brick facades, revealing the bones of their metal skeletons. With nothing to obstruct the sunlight, calling this block of the city "Blue Chip" was a bit of a joke.

But although the structures above ground were in sad condition, the subterranean structures were still in good working order. As a result, at some point it had become the gathering spot and demilitarized zone for a number of gangs. Even gang members were willing to admit that fighting all the time got to be a drag. They needed an oasis where they could relax and let their guards down without being attacked. Any asshole who didn't follow that one rule couldn't show his face in the slums again.

Nobody ever believed the rule would keep *everyone* in line, but year after year, no one dared to make the first move. Nobody wanted to be the first one dishonored, so a successful but tenuous balance remained.

Stripped to the waist, junkies hung out in the nooks of the steel

structures and got high beneath the winter sky. Too engrossed in their foreplay to care who was watching, lovers made out hot and heavy in the access tunnels. And somewhere else a foul-mouthed bunch argued to the point of near violence.

The DMZ was also known as the "whatever" zone. Apathy city. Everybody came looking for something, but nobody gave a damn what it was—as long as nobody got killed over it.

The man continued on his way, and he was left alone.

That same day. Blue Chip subterranean Level Three. Soraya Bar. Unlike most days, a strange and feverish air filled the premises. The usual vulgar laughter and crude jokes gave way to an unusually hushed silence. The collective gaze focused like a long-held breath until sweat broke out on the skin.

Within the tightly packed ring of onlookers, *the game* was being played.

Anybody could play—it was just an old-fashioned card game where victory relied on intuition and concentration. But it wasn't the kind of game played in the Midas casinos. The bets being laid on the table didn't involve money or honor, but virtue. The players laid their bodies on the line with each round.

"Gigolo." And at the center of all this attention in Soraya Bar, Riki and Luke were playing it.

It was a type of sex game, along the lines of a sex Show. The players started off with a kiss to ante up. As the pot increased, so did expectations. The loser settled on the spot. Those holding the cards as well as the spectators shared in the tension.

If someone was challenged to the game, no matter how disgusting the opponent, he hardly ever refused. "I'm in the mood to have my way with you," was how the game usually started. "We're playing gigolo," would be announced in front of everybody, making it that much harder to turn down. And any man who refused wasn't just

called a coward—word would get around that he couldn't get it up, both physically and metaphorically, and a man who couldn't do that wasn't any sort of man. Where same-sex hookups were the norm, not having the guts or the ability to perform amounted to the deepest stigma any man could have in the slums.

These spur-of-the-moment challenges amounted to little more than simple sex games—and in the end, laughing at the opponent's loss was usually the most the victor claimed. But they were taken with a seriousness of intent that sharpened everyone's nerves to a point. Since it was a game, one was expected to be a good sport about it in public. That was the theory, anyway. But as with any intimate activity, what went on *there* never completely stayed there.

Luke had already been sizing up Riki with yearning eyes. Or was it that he wanted to start a fight? Because of this, nobody was surprised when Luke called Riki out with the cry of "gigolo"—Riki included. Nor was anybody surprised that Luke had picked a time when Guy wasn't there.

Riki didn't care what anybody thought of him. But he still knew that he had to settle the score with Luke once and for all.

Between the time when he'd ditched Bison to work his way up, and the time since he'd come back after three blank years—the era, the circumstances, and the nature of the relationships had changed enormously.

Riki had returned to the slums knowing he'd be ridiculed. But contrary to expectations, the sudden upheavals in his environment did not grant him the quiet ignominy of a beaten dog, especially in the wake of the business with Jeeks. Maybe it was a mere accident, or fate inevitably closing the circle once again. But that and his first unknowing tangling with the Jeeks gang had, albeit reluctantly, driven the roots of destiny deeper into Riki's soul.

Even after Bison fell apart, a certain portion of the responsibility for losing their longtime safe house was still on Riki's head. However, hitting the Jeeks headquarters with tear gas in retribution was done

without Riki's knowledge.

And yet, all the onlookers felt that Bison was back for more.

Bison's back on its feet.

Riki's getting even.

Excited voices spread the rumors. From one ear to the next, they became all the more heated and distorted with each retelling. Once the rumors had gained a life of their own, they couldn't be expected to reflect the will or wishes of the concerned parties. Neither Riki nor the rest of Bison wanted to get stirred up by all the chatter, but, unfortunately, the fall out of the talk was beyond their control.

With that one incident, the members of Jeeks found their reputations ruined and their lives taking a turn for the worse. Their safe house lost, they turned all the more feral, striking out against anyone. And this wasn't just a problem for Riki and company. The trouble the Jeeks was causing affected the daily routine everywhere in the slums.

Settling the score with Jeeks was the inevitable burden Riki and his boys had taken on. Everybody was holding his breath in anticipation of the battle. With all of this attention, Bison's reputation was growing by the day, and its members were getting as anxious as the spectators.

"Those punks piss me off! Are we gonna fight them or not?"

"What are we gonna do, Riki? We gonna kick some ass?"

Luke's eyes narrowed to a squint. Strangely enough, Guy was pumped up and talking big. Norris made a point of twisting his lips into a sneer. Sid spit out his chew. And lastly—

"They're going down," Riki said heavily. "All of them. If we do it, we do it big. We have to pay them back with interest."

In that moment, it was as if everything inside him silently exploded outward. Beside him, the rest of the gang members were smiling at each other. They wanted to see some action.

After slacking off for a long time, Riki had become a completely different person. With Jeeks haranguing them at every turn, Riki had finally run out of patience and let his temper move things forward. They'd have to destroy Jeeks. With that resolved, the conversation quickly accelerated.

"Before we start, we need intel."

"Then we're obviously gonna need *him*."

"You mean Jango? God's Grim Reaper? He's not gonna help us."

"We need him."

"He's way too expensive."

"The going price all depends on who he's up against."

Jango was a dangerous man, just as bad as the word on the street made him out to be. Riki had once been block mates with the informant when Jango had been known as Robby. He still had some lingering connections with him, but Luke and the others declined to point this out.

Destroying Jeeks quickly meant going through God's Grim Reaper and looking Robby in the face once again. But, for whatever reason, Riki's expression showed no emotion.

Knowing about the history Riki and Robby shared at Guardian and the roots of their mutual antagonism did nothing for Guy's peace of mind. But the Jeeks rampage had become too much of a problem. Without accurate intel, they couldn't deliver the decisive blow. And knowing that, Guy didn't say anything more than what needed to be said.

All Guy could do at that point was follow Riki's lead. This implicit understanding wasn't simply an ingrained behavior; it was woven into Guy's pride about who he was and who *they* were.

Riki and Guy walked into the bar and made their way to the private

room in the back. The first rule in the information trade was that negotiations were conducted on the sly and away from prying eyes. Even so, the room they found themselves in was better furnished than either had expected.

Robby sat back on a shiny black sofa with his legs stretched out in front of him. He looked at Riki and Guy and grinned. "Still pairing up, eh?"

There were implications in his greeting, and for Riki, they were hard to miss. If it hadn't been necessary—and Riki had to remind himself of this constantly—then he never would have agreed to meet the man again. What had happened between them, no matter how many years before, would never be forgotten.

Everything Guy knew about Robby was from what Riki had told him. The two men had never met before, but Riki sensed the sparks flying as soon as they exchanged glances. Noticing this, Riki refocused his attention to make sure nothing went wrong.

There was one unknown in the equation, though. Robby wasn't alone. He shared the sofa with a kid with a mop of fiery red hair.

Who the hell is that?

Riki gave the redhead a look and quickly averted his gaze.

"Yo." The kid threw them a curt hello and stood. He stopped at the minibar in the corner of the room, picked up a shaker, and deftly gave it a toss.

"He's Thor." Robby took a drag off a cigarette and said nothing else.

The atmosphere was tense and silent. Both groups showed their apathy as signs of courage.

Thor returned with two glasses in hand. He calmly placed them before Riki and Guy. Riki furrowed his eyebrows, unable to derive the meaning of this abrupt little performance.

"It's called Guinevere," Thor said. "It's dry, but it's good."

Thor took a hard candy out of his pocket, popped it into his mouth, and crunched loudly. He carried on in an unaffected manner, but his frank attitude told Riki and Guy that they should either take the insolent kid for granted or recognize his actions as an act and raise their collective guard. Any kid willing to work with a man called God's Grim Reaper had to be bad news. If he wasn't, he had no right to sit next to Robby in that room.

"Drink up. It's not poisoned."

Robby didn't interject. He simply watched the scene unfold with a curious look on his face. Was this how he greeted all of his guests? Unless the drinks were some sort of test. At any rate, until Riki and Guy drank, nothing else was going to happen.

Riki picked up the glass and tasted a mouthful. It wasn't poisoned. Guy could sense what Riki expected of him, so he didn't drink from his own glass. Just in case it was something other than poison—a bad trip or whatever—Guy would be there to get him out.

"Hmm. So it's the leader venturing into the unknown? Isn't it usually the other way around?" Thor asked.

"I'm allergic," was Guy's simple excuse.

Thor openly sniffed at Guy's dodge. But catching some attitude didn't bother Guy in the least. Riki acted; Guy waited. No matter what the situation, that was the strategy they'd always sworn by.

The Guinevere had a unique taste. It hit the palate pleasantly enough, but had a strange aftertaste. The tingling sensation left behind on Riki's tongue struck a dormant nerve. Without giving the utterance much thought, he asked, "Balado?"

Thor's eyes widened. "Impressive," he said before chuckling. "You're good. I never would have believed someone in the slums would know the taste of Balado."

Catching a pointed edge in the praise, Riki shot Robby a glance. Robby shrugged as if to say: *Don't ask me.*

Balado was a special spice produced on the planet Aquos. Back

when Riki had worked the shipping routes, he'd gotten his hands on it fairly often. Balado took its name from the place it was produced, and could be divided into five varieties. Each had its own subtle aftertaste and aroma, and Riki had learned to tell the difference. He wasn't about to pay exorbitant prices for an inferior brand.

Thor had given him a popular variety of Balado called Merida. But even a less popular variety of Balado was still a luxury good, and not the kind of thing ever found in the slums. Using it to grease the wheels before a business negotiation was an informant's way of advertising the value of his merchandise. On the other hand, considering their history together, Riki knew this was Robby's way of saying this was going to cost Riki an awful lot.

Thor laughed and leaned forward. The wave of red hair filled Riki's line of sight. As Thor drew closer, Riki could see that his brown eyes were closer to black.

"You know where this Balado came from?" Thor asked.

"Merida."

Thor smiled, as much for show as delight. "Looks like they don't call you Riki the Black for nothing."

Beside Riki, Guy took a breath and shifted his position.

But even hearing his old slum handle, Riki didn't react, Robby was an information dealer. When Riki had contacted him, he'd expected Robby to know about his past as a courier to an extent.

No matter how much time passed for Riki and Robby, the antagonism from their time at Guardian had never died. But Riki hadn't thought such things would be exposed to some strange boy. Perhaps this was a miscalculation on his part.

"You were scouted out by a big shot in the market, weren't you?" Thor's eyes remained glued on Riki, showing an inquisitiveness more intense than mere curiosity. "Pretty impressive. A slum mongrel making it big in the world out there. How did you snag a chance like that?"

Riki didn't care if Thor was Robby's "kept woman." As long as he could get his hands on the right information, all the rest was moot. Even his past as a courier being outed wasn't that upsetting—they were just wasting his time.

"With a fence like Zach," Thor went on. "you had to pony up some kind of collateral to get that kind of pull, eh? But then you quit, with the brass ring in your hand."

It seemed like Thor was exposing the whole scandalous affair in front of Guy on purpose. It was pissing Riki off, so he decided to end it.

Riki drained the contents of his glass and shot Thor a look. "You a sinker?" he asked.

He lived up to the name "Riki the Black." With three small words, he brought Thor to complete silence. Thor's eyes widened abruptly at the blunt question. Robby's eyebrows twitched subtly, like an invisible thread was tugging at his skin.

Riki said in a restrained tone, "I couldn't say if you were Midas born and reared, or just some waif off the streets, though."

All the self-control Thor had been showing fell away. He immediately became wary and defensive.

"Your hair and eyes," continued Riki, locking his gaze on him. "You get them colored at your own expense?"

Thor hissed like an alley cat arching its back for a fight. His reaction hardly constituted solid proof, but it was clear that Riki's question had hit close to the mark.

Riki had deduced at a glance that the candy Thor was munching on was no ordinary confection, but a type of melanin pigmentation drug called Gazer. Since it was only a popular "fashion supplement," consumed orally to change hair and eye color, it wasn't very expensive. Most brands were legal and didn't have any severe side effects or long-term toxicities.

While the family of drugs was available in all varieties, the legal

brands had their good points and their bad. In particular, there was the instantly recognizable mottled or "impure" pigmentation of the eyes that never went away, and the fact that their potency had a limited time span.

If used to make a simple fashion statement, no matter the brand, the results were pretty much the same. But when looking on the black market, customers wanted brands with guaranteed performance and staying power. Gazer was the preferred choice.

The ones Thor was munching would be anything but over-the-counter drugs for the general population. The harmful side effects were greater and differed according to each person's physical constitution; vision impairments, eye deformities, and nerve paralysis were all possibilities. But most of it resulted in blindness, or the eyeballs desiccating in their sockets. In the worst case, the user put his life at risk. Because these were illegal drugs, nobody was liable—and nobody would talk.

Gazer was still very popular despite the risks. Those who used it habitually, reaching a set maintenance dosage, claimed they could "see the unseen." Riki didn't know if that was the truth, or just a slogan invented to inflate sales. But he definitely didn't want to fork over money to possibly see more than he already did.

If Thor was a Gazer user, some pressing set of circumstances must have led him down that path. Riki reasoned that the "refugee" vibe Thor gave off was the key to those circumstances.

To the citizens of Midas, the slum mongrels were objects of scorn and disgust—but the refugees who overstayed their visas and squatted there illegally were seen as no more than insects. Tanagura had the capability to evict all the refugees from Midas, but it had its reasons for not going through with it. Like the mongrels, refugees didn't have PAM ID devices. Consequently, with no traits or characteristics indicating place of birth, there was no way to tell the difference between them and the mongrels. Many refugees took advantage of that and passed as slum mongrels in order to take up residence on the colony.

Riki had become acquainted with the facts of refugee life during his

courier days with Katze. But knowing and doing were two different things. Unlike the citizens of Midas, Riki never thought of hunting the refugees down, beating them up, and running them out of town. They didn't lose their IDs and home planets just by overstaying their visas. With this all around him, Riki had developed a sixth sense for refugees mimicking mongrel life in order to settle down in Ceres.

However, there was also a breed of Midas born refugees, hiding out for reasons unknown. They didn't come off as all that different from the slum mongrels since they knew the colony. Thor was possibly changing his eye and hair color to hide his origins. He wouldn't be munching his way through Gazer just to make a fashion statement.

Whatever it was, by being so obvious about it, Thor had gone out of his way to annoy Riki. This turned the tables in Riki's favor.

"Idiot. You don't go gobbling down Gazer in plain sight. If you think us slum mongrels are just a bunch of morons, someone's gonna be handing you your ass on a platter."

At the mention of Gazer, Thor's face went white. Robby had been watching patiently the whole time from the sidelines, but he at last interrupted.

"Come on—don't tease the boy. He happens to be my partner for the time being."

"Then you both qualify as God's Grim Reapers?"

"I wouldn't go that far."



"Then he's only getting in the way. Show him the door."

With a loud bang, Thor slammed his fist down on the table. He glared and grit his teeth. "Don't fucking push your luck!"

"The kid doesn't know his place, Robby," Riki said shortly, "Tell him to keep quiet."

Thor leapt to his feet, but Robby grabbed his arm, ignoring the snarls aimed in his direction. "What are you stopping me for?" Thor snapped. He looked like a wounded animal; Riki had delivered his finishing blow with his usual precision.

"Nobody's better than this guy at finding someone's weakness; he's been able to do that since Guardian. Just drop it, all right? Shoot your mouth off in this game and you won't get a second chance." Robby looked at Riki, a meaningful smile dimpling one cheek. "Wouldn't you say?"

Like code exchanged between spies, only Riki and Robby understood the nuances in those words. Even Guy felt outside his territory.

"I'm not here to baby-sit. You wanna deal or not?"

"Fine," Robby said. "Here I am with the infamous Riki of Bison, who got a little carried away. We'll consider the introductions over with."

Thor couldn't hide the grudging expression on his face. He audibly grunted in dissatisfaction.

"You've gotten pretty scary, Riki," Robby said. "Even with you dragging your butt around like a beaten dog, you've still got a few aces up your sleeve."

"Don't get on *my* case. When did you hook up with this sinker kid?"

"He happened to be the only one with the balls to take on God's Grim Reaper as a pairing partner."

Pairing partner? Those were the last words Riki had expected to come out of Robby's mouth. "Really?" Riki cemented. "I thought you had better things to do with your time."

Riki knew how attached Robby had been to Schell.

I lost Schell because of you—but you're the one smiling. There's gotta be something wrong with the world, huh? Whatever I lost, you're gonna lose just as badly!

Riki could remember the black lump of violent emotions Robby had hurled at him that day in Guardian. But rather than guilty, Riki had felt more impetuous and annoyed by Robby's outburst. He and Robby had never gotten along since.

In Guardian, attachments became obsessions. Intractable emotions turned unnaturally pure. And the reality that love itself couldn't accomplish anything became painfully true. The only happiness possible came from inflicting pain on others. Children in Guardian learned to keep from being alone and ostracized, but also not to confuse dependency with trust. This suffocating and inescapable atmosphere suffused the "paradise" that was Guardian. All that was gained and lost there produced a defining sense of self that couldn't be compromised, no matter the cost.

Riki, Guy, and Robby all knew that. They were the children at Guardian who knew what really mattered. Adults were wont to call children like that "precious." It was why Riki didn't buy into the notion that Robby couldn't love anybody but Schell. But he hadn't wanted to contradict him, either. Robby being Robby, Riki had figured he was capable of getting over Schell's death.

As if he understood the thoughts going through Riki's mind, a small smile creased the corner of Robby's mouth.

Thor continued to sulk as he retrieved a computer terminal from beneath the table. He turned it on and began typing with the ease of someone experienced.

"OK," Robby said shortly. "What do you want to know about Jeeks?"

"You came prepared," Riki commented.

"That's the only reason you came to see me, right?"

Riki said nothing, despite his desire to ask why Robby had been

wasting his time with introductions.

"We need all the intel you have about what Jeeks has been up to lately," Guy said, rising to take care of the actual business. "In particular, who's really running the show and what he's thinking these days."

"I can give you profiles of all the current members, and a head count confirmation. Saved to disk."

"Fine."

Robby talked through the deal, and Thor hardly uttered a syllable as he rapidly worked the keyboard. They seemed to make an effective combination. "So you're finally getting around to having Jeeks for lunch. I almost feel sorry for them."

"We've been watching our diet."

"Either way, you're Riki the Black of the slums."

Riki furrowed his brow in obvious distaste. *Why would you say something like that now?* he wondered. Instead, he said, "You're passing on bogus info, Robby."

That was enough to make Robby pause. More than any of the particulars about his past or his rotten core, when it came to information peddling, he was the best. Robby's rep was whispered all over the slums.

"You think I'd do something as stupid as faking info? I don't have a death wish." Far from his off-the-cuff sarcasm, he spoke in a strangely subdued tone.

Thor suddenly paused his typing.

"What now?"

Thor looked up at Riki from under his eyebrows and finally spoke. "I heard that you and Robby were block mates at Guardian," he said. "Did you really pop his cherry?"

Riki was dumbfounded that Thor could ask that question with a straight face. Where had *that* come from? No matter how perverse the point of view, the question made no sense. Riki and Robby inadvertently found their eyes meeting; they just as quickly grimaced and averted their eyes.

The looks on their faces must have triggered something in Guy. He stifled a laugh.

"There are some things even I won't eat," Riki blurted.

"That's *my* line," Robby rejoined.

Even as a joke, the idea of their first time being together was too grotesque for either of them to imagine. Yet Thor had forced them to.

Ready to get back to a less nauseating subject, Robby asked, "Will you be taking this opportunity to signal Bison's comeback?"

"What's the use of digging up those ghosts now?"

"You quit while you were ahead, with an unbeaten winning streak. The name Bison still has cred on the streets. Once upon a time, Jeeks considered you a pain in their collective ass. It's obvious they want to start with you."

That's the kind of information you're supposed to be giving us. But Riki knew rumors were only rumors. Only the people personally involved knew for certain what the truth was.

Keep your ears open. Don 't avert your eyes from reality no matter what happens. And keep your mouth shut.

The three fundamental rules for success in the black market. Three tried and true rules for self-preservation. Riki hadn't forgotten them.

"Their whining's just gotten annoying, so I'll take care of them now to save me the trouble later. End of story."

"If that's your plan, I don't exactly see spectators going along for the ride."

"Which is why I'm trying to keep the bullshit to a minimum," Riki replied, a touch of menace in his eyes. He was here to buy legitimate information, not gossip.

"I'm with you on that. Don't go starting trouble if you can't finish it."

There was a nuance in his voice that rubbed Riki the wrong way, but he didn't feel the need to add more to the conversation. He didn't want Robby's red-haired partner or Guy getting the wrong idea about what this was all about.

With Robby's information in hand, he was going to crush that miserable bunch of brats without mercy. He didn't give a damn how young and inexperienced they were. When he brought the hammer down, it'd be for good.

The members of the headless gang had been driven out and scattered, leaving them vulnerable to attack. That was true justice—a reflection of the kind of enmity that the Jeeks gang had been working up everywhere they went.

The rumors of Bison's rebirth were not likely to gain strength just because Jeeks had been dealt a decisive blow. The original members of Bison understood that fact better than anyone.

This time around, though, the stark reality was that something had pushed Luke into action. And the expression of those stagnated emotions was a game of gigolo.

Riki let it lie. Leaving it to the cards was probably the best way to make sure it didn't happen again, anyway. If he lost, he'd deal with it—after three years of being "educated" as Iason's pet, doing such things in public hardly bothered him. Besides, once challenged to a game of gigolo, there wasn't much difference between winning and losing. As long as a return match wasn't sought, he wouldn't have to deal with this again.

The game lasted three rounds; it ended when the challenger lost or his opponent took it up the ass. Common sense dictated that

penetration was the only worthwhile bet on the table. The challenge could be made only once. Though a game had three rounds, one loss could end it if the challenger wanted. There was no value in not going for everything right from the start.

So when Luke started out the betting with a kiss, everybody groaned. He needed a lot of confidence in his card game if he wanted to go all three rounds.

Unexpectedly, Riki lost.

A stir of voices erupted, accompanied by shrill whistles and catcalls. A complacent look on his face, Luke urged on a deep French kiss with Riki. Around them came the sound of throats swallowing hard.

In the midst of this breath-stopping kiss, their bodies glued together, Luke pressed forward with his thighs, pumping his midsection against Riki's. Riki lowered his eyes slightly. At the periphery of his vision, Norris and Sid gazed at them anxiously.

With their thighs chafing against each other, the obvious stimulation directed to the groin, it would have been a lie to say he felt nothing. The male mechanism was never completely under a man's self-control, a fact Riki understood to a nauseating degree.

Still, the fact that the thought flashed across his mind was all the more reason he wanted to keep control of the situation. Riki remained tranquil within that pocket of excited noise. He couldn't say himself whether this made him powerful or pathetic.

Wanting to go all the way with him, Luke once again dealt the cards. The dispassionate Riki had always made his loins stir, and he was eager to see how passionate the other man could be. The spectators held their breath, focusing their eyes on the card game as they rooted for Luke to win.

Flipping over his final card and pleased with his hand, Luke smiled. "Two pair," he said in triumph "Jacks and Sevens."

Riki asked for two cards. Wordlessly, Riki laid down his cards one at a time. All attention focused on his hand. Three kings. The air

went out of the disappointed rabble in a noisy, collective sigh. And yet the faint smile on Luke's face didn't fade, but became an ironic smile not quite of self-derision. It didn't look like the grimace of a loser, either.

What the—

Something inside Luke had clearly snapped. Riki grasped that much. Slightly furrowing his eyebrows, he rose from his seat. As he did, the crowd stirred itself in a manner different from the tense atmosphere of earlier. In a single breath, the air in the place released all of its tension.

Suddenly, a man pushed his way through the wave of people. "Riki!" he called.

In the dim light, the undisguised scar on his left cheek was plain to see. Turning toward the sound of the voice, Riki suddenly stopped. The figure of the man loomed up in his vision. For a second, the shock of recognition made his shoulders tremble.

Katze?

Katze's unexpected appearance struck Riki like a blow to the back of the head. His pulse pounded strangely as his throat went dry. The world reeled before his eyes. Though he knew he should run away, he couldn't budge from the spot.

"I need to talk to you. Can you spare a minute?" Katze not only took no notice of the feverishly speculating throngs, but he even ignored Riki's obvious confusion at his appearance. "I'll be waiting outside."

He turned on his heel and strode away as the crowded bar gossiped behind him. The sudden incursion of the stranger—whether he was a good guy or a bad guy—had the place in an uproar.

"Who the hell was that just now? Did you see his face?"

"What a waste. He wasn't bad-looking—scary as hell, though."

"Seems like him and Riki know each other. Old partner, y'think?"

"The only partner he's had is Guy, dumbass."

Riki sighed to himself. Still, there was nothing he could have done to prevent those heavy-laden footfalls. As he exited the garishly decorated doors, he noticed Katze outside, the man's mouth softening into the tiniest smile. Perhaps he hadn't fully expected Riki to come.

"It's been four years."

"You sure knew where to find me." There was no way Katze had simply wandered around and asked about Riki's whereabouts. Rather more importantly, that wasn't the kind of thing Katze *would* do. The thought made Riki draw his eyebrows together in confusion.

Katze took his beloved cigarette case from his breast pocket. No, not a cigarette case. Without a word, Katze opened the case and showed Riki what was inside.

And Riki knew he'd been had.

It was the latest model of tracking devices. Projected on the screen inside the case was a digital map encompassing Cuzco Avenue to Blue Chip. A location that was probably Soraya Bar was marked with a blinking orange dot.

Riki stared at the blinking dot. *Now I get it*, he thought.

Back when he was known as Riki the Black, Katze had given him a butterfly knife that had a cell phone built in. Even now, it was tucked into the pocket of Riki's jacket. He took it out. "This thing still works?" he asked, turning it over in his hand.

"I suppose I should be the one saying that," Katze said unapologetically. "I figured you would've thrown it out long ago."

"I hadn't thought about this thing in a long time."

"Well, it saved me a lot of trouble." Katze switched off the display and returned the case to his pocket.

"What do you want?" Riki asked. "You didn't come just to talk about old times.

Riki knew that Katze, the infamous black marketeer, rarely stirred from his underground vault—and he doubted that Katze had changed much in four years. He had to have a serious reason to show off his scarred face in the old haunts.

"Is there someplace we can sit and have a conversation?"

"If you have that much to talk about, we'll go to my place." Riki was once again relieved that he hadn't taken Guy with him that afternoon.

The following day, Guy would know everything. Luke challenging Riki to gigolo, Riki leaving in the company of a scar-faced man of dubious intent... but that was for the following day.

Riki and Katze left Blue Chip together.

Chapter 4

It took twenty minutes to walk from Cuzco Avenue to Riki's place. The sun seemed to be setting unusually early for the season. By the time they got back, dark had fallen.

"What did you want to talk about?" was the first question out of Riki's mouth as they stepped into his room. "Never mind the small talk. Just get to the point."

Riki wanted to wrap things up as quickly as possible and get Katze out of there. Using bluntness was one way of getting the message across.

He did offer Katze a chair, but Katze didn't sit down. He leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette.

"This Kirie kid," Katze said at last. "The one with the funny eyes. You know him?"

Kirie's name being thrown out made Riki frown despite himself. After all this time, why was he hearing that name coming out of Katze's mouth? He couldn't believe that news of the business with Jeeks had reached even Katze's ears—but then maybe he didn't realize how far Katze's eyes and ears reached in the slums. Katze wasn't the kind of man who came unprepared.

"Whatever he's up to has nothing to do with me," Riki said, wanting to head off any assumptions. To Riki—and to all the founding members of Bison—Kirie was a pest and a jinx. Whatever the nature of Katze's intentions, associating with Kirie on a daily basis was not a good way to start.

"Really? Strange, since he seems so obsessed with you."

Riki couldn't deny it. Although Kirie's obsession was more about the limelight than about Riki; he actually blamed Riki for blocking the rays of his glory. Anybody who knew both of them knew that as well. If Kirie was making noise about something for no reason, it was so he could get attention. It was obvious they didn't get along,

considering how different they were.

But Kirie wasn't some simple punk with an over-inflated sense of self. If he was, the problem would have taken care of itself without complications. Kirie had ideas and ambition and the pride to match. Lady Luck had smiled on him, and now his arrogance knew no bounds. He'd been an asshole to begin with, and now he was worse.

Riki had no intention of ever making nice with Kirie. Nor would he react to how Kirie tried to fan the flames of their rivalry. Riki couldn't care less how many times he got in his face and sneered: *You don't belong here.*

But now Kirie was coming at him in a form that could cause real damage, and that was another matter entirely. Riki wanted to knock Kirie on his ass so hard he'd never show his face again.

"He's been sniffing around at the Rosas Market, asking questions about you."

Riki hadn't realized Kirie's meddling had gone so far. Apparently, riding his air car around the slums and making big claims wasn't enough; Kine had started poking into Riki's business, probably looking for some dirt.

It seemed like such a long time ago that Riki had been a courier, but for some reason, Robby and Kirie kept spreading it around. Still, that didn't really worry Riki, since he didn't think it would make much of a difference.

Everything was coming along so strangely. Riki understood the animosity from Robby; the man was a natural enemy. With Robby, he shared a past, and though it wasn't as strong as his connection with Guy, the three of them couldn't escape their time in Guardian together.

But Kirie was different. Kirie was an inconvenience, a foreign body invading Riki's daily routine. Katze stepping forward to mention Kirie meant something larger was at work. When he thought of it in those terms, Riki's face grew harder.

"Word getting out that I used to run errands for you can't be good for either of us, can it?"

"Relax. A little digging won't reveal everything."

He had a point. As one of Katze's transporters, Riki had always paid heed to the letter of the law, even when smuggling contraband through back channels. In the first place, when Katze took a job, no matter how shady, he never exposed himself in a way that the likes of Kirie would ever find out.

Katze was a smoother, more demanding, and more efficient operator than his looks let on. Nobody in the black market doubted that for a second. If Kirie got his fingers burned while poking around, he certainly had it coming.

"If that's not the problem, what do you want?" Riki asked. He wanted a little forewarning if something was on the horizon.

"You wouldn't happen to know who's backing Kirie?"

"Not a clue," Riki answered brusquely, and more forcefully than necessary. "I couldn't care less what he's up to." He glared at Katze, trying to figure out what the other man was getting at.

Riki knew Katze hadn't come just because of the business with Kirie. Katze could understand better than anyone where those three missing years had gone, so Riki wanted to avoid him at all costs. No matter the "good times" they might have shared in the past, Riki just wanted to grab Katze by the collar, drag all information out of him, and then never see him again.

Consequently, over the past year, other than attending an auction in Mistral Park, he hadn't set foot in Midas. But when he was there, he'd had the shock of a second encounter with Iason, and that only strengthened his inclination to avoid anything related to the Blondy.

But while stubbornly turning his back on that, trouble had shown up from an unexpected quarter and in an unexpected form. Katze's sudden reappearance was the most conspicuous evidence of this.

And going so far as to demand a face-to-face meeting only exacerbated things.

Riki couldn't help but be conscious of the fault lines in his relationship with Katze—there were cracks there that couldn't easily be mended. Although Riki's instincts weren't warning him of anything immediately dangerous, he was still on edge enough to make his joints ache. Katze's range of experience far exceeded his own. If the time ever came, Katze could crush Riki in a moment. That was what having real power meant.

"I'm more worried about just letting things lie with all this commotion going on. When people start sticking their noses where they don't belong, it's going to be hard getting them back out again," Katze said.

"You're something else. You came all the way here just to tell me that? If word of this ever got to Kirie, he'd go nuts." Riki accompanied the needling aside with an exaggerated shrug. Even knowing that Katze was hardly the kind to dote on his ex-employees, the way he spoke left Riki with a completely different impression. He was acting like the previous four years had never happened.

"If I had my way, I'd rather not get jerked around by some amateur. Watching some kid claw his way to the top only to get knocked down again doesn't do me any good, as you may know."

The barbs in Katze's words stung hard. The insinuations were clear. Riki felt a clenching in his gut. Before his mind could tell his mouth to shut up, the question slipped out of his mouth.

"Katze... that speech you gave me. Four years ago—"

As his thoughts condensed into words, the questions became clearer. Over the past four years, he'd never been able to come up with a satisfying answer, and now he had Katze in front of him. A man who had to know more than he did.

He knew why Katze had chosen him to be a courier. That was just a subterfuge to lure him in. The real question was *why had Katze sold*

him to Iason?

Riki knew the question probably wasn't worth asking. He couldn't turn back the hands of time. Tearing uselessly at old wounds wouldn't make the past disappear—it would only make fresh blood flow.

On the other hand, as soon as the words rose to his lips, the contained anger rose to the surface as well. He'd told himself he would never utter that name again, and yet the simmering rage was uncontainable.

"Iason once fed me the same line. 'Didn't Katze warn you about being too curious?' The two of you being on such good terms sure surprised me."

"You and Kirie," Katze commented. "You're in completely different leagues set up for completely different purposes. That was already decided four years ago."

"What the hell does that mean?" Riki was growling low in his throat, but the voice in his head screamed wildly. He narrowed his eyes as he waited for Katze to speak. His heart hammered in expectation.

"You must know that Tanagura has a public face and then its own private world, right?" Katze asked.

Yeah, news to me. But before Riki could spit that out, Katze pressed forward.

"So there's got to be somebody pulling the strings in the private world, right?"

Riki bit down hard on his lower lip, Katze was offering him something here, matters that shouldn't be spoken about. He didn't doubt that right now he was digging his own grave, but Riki couldn't bring himself to throw Katze out. Even if he regretted it later, he needed to know the truth.

But—*why now?* It had been a year since he'd returned to the slums. After all this time, what would inspire Katze to unburden the truth

on him now? And why use Kirie as a pretext? It only raised further questions in his mind. Wherever this was going, Riki felt there was no way he could leave it unsettled. He could tell Katze wouldn't leave it alone, either; Riki could sense that the man needed to spill something.

"Four years ago, Iason contacted me via the Gauche auction and asked about an odd-looking mongrel. Black hair and black eyes, a tough kid with the personality to match. I knew he had to be talking about Riki of Bison.

"I was the middle man in the black market, and you were a slum mongrel in the slums. We were the right men at the right time."

Riki paused. "So you *were* the one who set the trap."

"Iason was the one who said I should use you and see what happened. I just didn't say no. Though no matter what I say at this point, it'll only sound like a setup to you."

"Why go through with it? Were you scared of him?"

"Hell yes, I was scared," Katze said in flat apathy. "Every time those cold eyes fixed on me—I still get the shakes thinking about it."

And with that, Riki knew Katze was telling the truth. He'd felt that cold gaze too often himself. For years he'd suffered the humiliation and torment of those eyes, submitting to them like a lamb.

In no time at all, that humiliation had changed into unfathomable fear. Getting punched in the face would have been preferable. There was no end to the pain held in Iason's iron grip, and Riki didn't doubt that Iason knew the pain he caused. When Riki remembered those things in that light, he could almost feel those sensations again. Half unconsciously he jerked his head, taking a gulp of air.

"But there was one condition on my employing you in the market. He liked your pride, but he didn't need a simpleminded slum mongrel. Neither did I. So you were given a task to do, in an allotted time, and that's what it came down to in the end."

"Our first meeting."

"Exactly."

Riki wanted to believe that everything had begun with the card Zach had given him—but it was really just one domino knocked over by all the rest. Iason had been fixing the game ever since the night they first met. The same way Riki couldn't put the humiliation behind him, Iason, more willingly, hadn't been able to let go. The painful reality of the situation made Riki's entire body ache.

"For your own sake, I hoped you were just another thickheaded slum mongrel. But you had the superior qualities needed to get yourself out of this hellhole."

Riki scowled despite himself. Wishing he were stupid wasn't the sort of compliment he wanted to hear from Katze. But Riki *didn't* feel very bright after having taken the bait. Katze's words had a double edge to them, and the words "superior qualities" struck Riki as spiteful.

"Or maybe I should say you had the raw materials of a superior sort, Riki. You have pride and ambition and you were willing to put in the blood and sweat to make things happen. Iason was satisfied with the results. He knew a good thing when he saw it."

Iason's instincts must have been wrong, then; he should have kept fishing around the black market. It would have been a better idea than trying to make a pet out of a slum mongrel.

Katze sent Riki a meaningful glance, not wanting to be the only one providing information. "This all leads to the question *I* want answered, Riki: what's between you and Iason?"

Riki couldn't find the words, even though the sharp glint of Katze's eyes cut through the usually warm tones of his voice. When Riki refused to answer, Katze shrugged and continued.

"The first directive I got from Iason was to keep my eyes peeled for an Aurora coin in the slums. I wondered why he expected me to see one, since Aurora coins are only used by the pets in Eos. If Iason hadn't made the request, I would've just laughed it off!"

Riki remembered that Aurora coin. The symbol of his disgrace and mined pride. When he'd picked it up, Riki hadn't realized how soon he would find out that he was just a child lost at sea.

"But I watched and waited, and the coin never showed up."

Of course it hadn't. Riki hadn't dared cash it in or learn where it came from. Also unable to throw the thing away, he had instead carried it with him as a kind of talisman—a warning to himself. He had had no idea what it was until Alec saw it and told him it was "pet currency." That discovery had made him murderous.

"Maybe Iason made a miscalculation when that coin never showed up. But in the end, it didn't matter if it did or not. He still wanted *you*."

Without knowing the reason why and with no knowledge of the grand strategy, Katze had simply done what he was told. Riki knew that was the way the relationship between Iason and Katze was and always would be.

But why was Katze telling him all this now? Was he simply taking his last shot? The question stuck in Riki's throat. It was the thorn in his paw he couldn't remove by himself. This was his last, best chance.

"What does any of this have to do with Kirie?" Riki finally asked. "Whatever you're looking for won't change anything. Curiosity killed the cat, remember?" The empty arrogance of a clueless street kid and the urge to satisfy his curiosity had cost him dearly. He'd paid off that debt playing Iason's pet for three years.

Riki had no desire to go back to that particular part of his past. He was done with it, once and for all. "I paid for my pride through the nose and a few other body parts. There's no way I'm getting involved with that again for some stranger. Especially not because of Kirie." With those words, Riki made it clear what Kirie was to him.

"Don't you understand how I felt?" Riki continued, his voice raising in volume. He went on in one long, angry breath, not giving Katze a

chance to break in edgewise. "You pinch your arm and still don't know what really hurts, so you break your arm just to make sure. That's how it was for me back then. Are you trying to tell me that's what it was like for *you*?"

Riki couldn't pretend those three years hadn't happened. But even if he couldn't cast it off completely, he could at least move on. He didn't care if people thought him a coward as long as the past was bound in the chains of those three, shame-stained years. He didn't want his life to end. Even though those thoughts occupied his mind, he still felt some lingering attachment to his own life. He couldn't throw it away or give up. That was what being alive meant.

"That's a strange question. What have you heard about me?" Katze asked.

"Nothing. It's just that anyone can tell you won life's lottery just by looking at you."

Katze unexpectedly grimaced. Riki, suddenly, realized he'd stepped on a landmine.

"You think I won life's lottery?" Katze asked derisively in a hoarse, deflated voice. "Maybe you're right, but it doesn't feel like it." He took a deep breath. "Particularly since I used to be a piece of Blondy furniture."

"You were *what*?"

It took Riki several long moments to make sense of what he'd just heard. And even when he *had* made sense of it, the numbing impact of the shock still gripped his brain.

Katze was a slum mongrel the way Riki was... but he'd once been *Blondy furniture*? What the *fuck*? How was that even possible? How did that affect the relationship that Iason and Katze had? Riki couldn't begin to imagine. He didn't even know the appropriate expression to wear on his face.

Furniture.

In every room of the palatial tower in Eos that housed the Tanagura

elite lived the youth called furniture. "Lived" wasn't even an appropriate word. With hair cropped short, and wearing uniforms that emphasized the lean lines of their bodies, they were merely luxury items furnished like organic household appliances.

Of course, they weren't there for their own enjoyment. They were chosen for physiques that went well with the installed decor, and sufficient intelligence so they could interface with the latest electronic equipment. The private lives of the elite at Eos were set apart in order to ensure the performance of their duties with efficiency. In line with that mentality, the furniture tended to the pets. To be sure there was no trouble from the contact between furniture and pets, furniture was castrated as a matter of course.

When Riki found out how far the elite would go—bypassing androids and castrating humans to install *them* as living appliances—just to live in comfort and ease, it made him physically ill. But back then he hadn't had much sympathy to spare.

Riki only knew Katze as the shrewd hand who ruled the black market. By the time they'd met, Katze had already become the cold-hearted meritocrat who'd cleansed his body of the last drops of human emotion. Riki had wondered on more than a few occasions if Katze wasn't really human, but an android. Apparently, he hadn't been too far off.

But he still couldn't imagine Katze as a piece of Eos furniture. Though that wasn't all of it. As if to confuse Riki all the more, Katze dropped another bombshell.

"Did you know that *all* the furniture in Eos are slum mongrels, Riki?"

With this small piece of information, the blood drained from Riki's face.

Nice to meet you. My name is Daryl.

Riki's mind suddenly flashed back to the delicate face of a boy of indeterminate age. The furniture installed in Iason's quarters.

My job is to take care of you, Master Riki. If there's anything you want, please tell me.

Back then, he hadn't realized. Daryl's speech and conduct had been endlessly irritating. He hadn't cared that it was the furniture's job to insert itself into every aspect of his life.

In the slums, when Riki was with Guy, he could do whatever he wanted Whenever he wanted. Guy's presence was like a salve on his soul. He never once found it bothersome.

Daryl was different. Knowing Daryl was always right behind him left Riki constantly on edge. No matter how he shouted and verbally abused the boy, Daryl was still there.

"I do my own thing my own way."

"Don't crowd me, man."

"Leave me the fuck alone!"

But no matter how many times he let Daryl have it, no matter how much he ranted and raved, it was the same routine over and over again.

"You can't do that. In Eos, only the word of your master is absolute. My duty is to watch after you and tend to your health—it's something your master has determined."

Daryl had even barged into the bathroom and tried to scrub every nook and cranny of Riki's body to a spit and polish. *That* Daryl was a fucking bother. Even trashing the room hadn't gotten Daryl to stop. And no matter what Daryl did, it just made Riki madder. At times, for one reason or another, Daryl would say exactly the wrong thing or look at Riki exactly the wrong way, sending Riki into a fit of disgust.

"When did slum mongrels turn into an endangered species? Quit lurking around me. You're a pain in the ass!"

Everything Daryl did set him over the edge.

But that Daryl—all the Eos furniture... they were all *slum mongrels*?



Katze had to be lying. It was just a joke, another con. Hit by this second shock, Riki could only stare at Katze dumbly.

"Guardian is under Tanagura's thumb," Katze explained slowly, to clear up any of Riki's doubt. "A kid with a good-enough face on a good-enough head, innocent of the ways of the world, is destined to be installed as custom-made living furniture in Eos."

That something that outrageous could even exist... it made Riki want to scream. But his trembling, dry throat, his racing pulse, his brain clamping down like a box hinged with a rusty lid—the pain made sound impossible. What Katze was telling him was more than impossible, more than unbelievable.

No. Perhaps... he just didn't *want* to believe.

"Why do you think Ceres alone persevered in practicing natural birth? Did you ever take the time to figure *that* one out?"

Riki shook his head. He never had. It simply hadn't mattered to him. Guardian hadn't been any kind of paradise to him.

"Do you really believe that it should be a human right to do it the way God intended?"

Riki hadn't put much thought into *that*, either, although he couldn't say he really believed it. But he couldn't quite bring himself to *deny* it, either. The belief was too deeply embedded in his bones. That was the way Ceres had made him.

"Without genetic tinkering, males and females would be born in close to equal proportions. The only reason fewer females are born is that somebody's already been tweaking the basic biological factors. It's been going on for generations."

Riki swallowed hard. He stared at Katze.

"Tanagura is practicing population control. By making slum mongrels disposable, the citizens of Midas feel better than the rest of us. We're an object lesson about what happens to scum who don't bow and scrape as they should. If everyone was living a sweet life, everything would be thrown out of balance. They can't live with us,

but they can't kill us all off or the scales will tip too far in one direction. Women having kids right and left would pose a problem, so they engineered the game. Now, no matter which way the ball rolls, it'll always end up in the gutter."

In the slums, no matter which way the ball rolls, it'll always end up in the gutter. The icy echoes in those words were enough to make Riki sway on his feet.

A crooked expression creased one side of Katze's face. "When I found out I was chosen to be furniture in Eos," he spat, "I was so excited. If I had the face and brains for it, I had to be different from the rest of them. I was leaving Guardian for something better. But in the end, trash is still trash—and I was just another clueless kid."

Katze's heavy words clung like thick glue. Riki knew perfectly well what he was talking about.

"My first night in Tanagura, we were brought to a medical center and finally learned what being *furniture* really entailed. It was a shock. I completely blanked out."

In Riki's mind, Katze's refined, android-like features suddenly merged with those of Daryl's. Riki had no idea what Daryl's real age was, and he'd never made an effort to find out. Daryl followed every command of Iason's, and that made him Riki's enemy. Riki couldn't sympathize with one of his tormentors, and he didn't want sympathy back. That would result in revealing his weaknesses.

So Riki had put up a stubborn front, covered his ears, and pushed away any hand that reached out to him. He had to stand on his own two feet. There was no compromising the pride that made him who he was. It was no exaggeration to say that Riki's identity as a slum mongrel was integral to the defense of his sense of self.

"We'll see about that pride of yours," Iason would whisper mockingly in his ear. "It's going in the trash, where it belongs."

Katze's voice snapped him out of his reverie.

"In any case," Katze went on, "I thought it was better than ending

my miserable life in the slums. We were chosen and couldn't exactly refuse. If we had a choice, I don't think any of us would have turned it down."

If I'd put such a positive spin on things, maybe I could've lived the good life in Eos, Riki couldn't help but think. He awkwardly licked his chapped lips. But the reality of living the "good life" in Eos was much blunter and rawer. He couldn't go back to that.

"You don't get a break without giving something up. So I took care of pets. Furniture is disposable—you do what you're told to in order to survive. You shut down your emotions and you deal, even if you have to punish someone from the same place you are. That's what it took to be suitable for a Blondy. You weren't a man anymore, but as long as you didn't try to be more than what you were destined for, you could be content."

Riki curled his hands into fists. Katze's words put the meaning of being Blondy furniture in a completely different light.

In Eos, the only law is that of your master.

Daryl went down on Riki because Iason ordered it. "Knock it off!" Riki would scream as he physically lashed out, but to no avail. Until Iason gave the contrary order, Daryl would stoically keep at it—parting his knees, burying his face between his thighs, making Riki hard whenever he refused to get himself off.

"You still don't know, Master Riki. Just how frightening he can be."

Riki knew all too well how ruthless, proud, and cold the powerful Iason could be. But for Riki, that wasn't the worst of it. He reserved his true loathing for Daryl, the furniture that stubbornly dogged him at Iason's word alone, showing no resistance to the Blondy's orders. It was Daryl's existence he couldn't accept.

Master Riki.

The way Daryl addressed him grated at his pride. He felt that the honorific slandered his mongrel roots.

Though a pet and a piece of furniture might be kept in the same

room, their values were completely different. Riki had considered them two separate species.

Riki had incorrectly assumed the furniture was bred and trained in special facilities as the pets were, since the way Daryl went down on him was better than how Guy did it. Riki had never been fucked by anybody but Guy, and the novelty of Daryl's technique aroused utterly unique sensations. But despite the physical pleasure, Riki hated being sucked off by that eunuch. Even meekly exposing himself to Iason to show submission, even gritting his teeth and jerking off for Iason, was preferable to Daryl's humiliating oral ministrations.

But even when Riki learned to spread his legs wide in front of Iason, the Blondy wouldn't tell Daryl to stop. Exposing himself wasn't enough. It was sexual training in the name of "discipline." Stark naked, tucked into Iason's lap, with the man's arms wrapped around Riki's torso, pinning his knees wide apart, binding him hand and foot. Iason beckoned Daryl and Daryl sucked Riki until his ass throbbed and his balls trembled.

Daryl tormented the honeyed mouth of Riki's cock with the tips of his fingers and lapped at him with the tip of his tapered tongue. That alone brought Riki to climax, sending shuddering groans from his mouth. Daryl sucked on Riki until he was drained dry, swallowing every drop wrung out of him.

"I've—got—nothing—left—!" Riki would cry, his voice trembling. And Daryl would continue to fondle and lick him.

"Your body is far more honest than your mouth," Iason laughed coldly.

But the pain and embarrassment didn't end with that. Before penetrating Riki with his fingers, Iason would have Daryl loosen Riki with his tongue. Iason watched out of enjoyment. Daryl applied himself to each fleshy fold, tapping the inexhaustible reservoirs of pleasure and disgust until Riki's nether regions rose in excitement.

This routine went on for six months. And then Iason started fucking him, and Daryl was no longer called into the bedroom. Even though

being embraced by Iason and mercilessly penetrated caused a kind of pain he feared might tear his body apart, it was still better than exposing himself to Daryl and having his mouth all over him.

Daryl still cleaned Riki up afterward. When Riki had been taken by Iason and reduced to a paraplegic pulp—needing ointments on his bleeding back end, inflamed from being stuffed to capacity—Daryl had catheterized the bedridden Riki and taken any abuse Riki could throw.

Riki had no idea how Daryl felt about everything, and he didn't particularly want to know. The normal Daryl was obviously shy, although not sexually. It was strange that when Riki was nakedly exposed beyond anything he'd ever experienced, repeatedly fellated until his whole body shook, he never once saw in Daryl anything approaching sexual desire.

Still, Riki didn't consider Daryl a disposable appliance. If furniture was a disposable consumer good, then pets bred and reared as the sex-crazed playthings of the elites could hardly be described differently. Despising Daryl was no different from despising himself.

After being bedded by Iason, no matter how abusive Riki became, Daryl never lost control. After many long months, Riki started to realize it was Daryl's way of showing his pride. It took unflagging strength to honestly accept a person for what he was—no matter how violent and aggressive. The realization came to Riki slowly, but came it did. And though he never developed a liking for Daryl as a piece of furniture, it was better than how he felt about the other pets of Eos.

In the end, Riki staved off boredom by watching Daryl run around in his animated manner tending to things. It usually made Daryl wary, though—Riki behaving was like the calm before a storm.

"Just as everything you say and do reflects on your master's honor," Daryl would say, "your health reflects on my duties and responsibilities. I live to make sure that you feel at home here." *A mismanaged pet is the shame of its owner and the responsibility of the furniture.* That was common knowledge in Eos.

"Sure," Riki would snap, his voice raising in rage. "You feed the pets, you change the pets, you clean up after the master is done fucking the pets. I wouldn't think of pretending I'm a free man!"

But in the end, no matter what trouble Riki got into with other pets, Iason said only one thing in passing: "The salon is the one place where pets may do as they wish. For the most part, what goes on there is given a pass. But understand this, Riki: if there's a fire, whether or not you struck the match, when word gets out, *you'll* be the one they blame. Don't give them that opportunity."

But then the business with Mimea got out. To Riki and Iason, the scandal that rocked Eos and threatened to knock Iason off his perch was the turning point of everything. Riki was the one whose body was compelled to learn the true meaning of the words "a lesson you'll never forget," and after that day, Iason's attitude hardened. When Riki disobeyed at home, Iason would abuse him until he couldn't stand. And when Riki came to heel obediently at Iason's feet, Iason would mock him and ask what devious plan he was plotting. At times like that, Riki growled until he was hoarse.

The body that Iason mercilessly punished couldn't even remember Daryl's attentions afterward. And what *had* become of Daryl? Riki didn't know. The two of them had parted ways too suddenly.

One day, the shut doors in the main lobby had suddenly opened before his eyes. For a moment, the world in front of him was a blaze of white light. Riki reached his hand out the door as if in a dream. Half in shock, Riki stepped forward... and outside of Eos.

"*Stop right there!*" called out the security guards.

Riki sprinted without a thought. But his escape was cut short; he was arrested and detained. For escaping Eos, Riki was positive he would be dealt with for good.

As was to be expected, Iason remained silent. But instead of sending Riki to the recycling and disposal center, Iason returned him to the slums. It was a shock greater than the doors of Eos opening before him. His pet ring was removed and nothing else held him back. Wild ecstasy shook his body. He ran off as fast as he could before

Iason could change his mind.

Riki figured that Daryl was just tending to another of Iason's pets those days. Whether Riki was there or not, Eos didn't change. Or so Riki believed.

But knowing that Daryl had come from the same slums as himself changed his three years in Eos. Why the *hell*? What the *fuck*? He hadn't wanted to know, but now he did. He suddenly hated Katze for driving the raw truth into him like a spear, especially now that he was no longer with Daryl.

"When I was furniture," Katze explained, "I had no use for the snitching and backbiting. But there was something in it for me. For five years, I looked down at Midas. And it felt good. It was like there was nothing in this world that I was afraid of."

Blondy furniture. His master was very likely Iason himself.

"—which is probably why I made that deal with the devil. *See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil*. That's the iron law of the furniture. Devour the forbidden fruit of curiosity once and you'll never get the taste out of your system again."

Riki's skull tightened like a vice around his brain. There was serious weight in Katze's charges. Opening his eyes to the truth was painful, but he couldn't avert his eyes from that reality.

For Riki, those three years had been nothing but stifling humiliation. While Katze continued with his revelations, Riki struggled to understand him. Katze's words were like a festering infection.

"I knew Guardian was a toy in the hands of Tanagura," Katze went on mercilessly. "But I was curious. Using the terminal in my room, I spent half a year searching the databases. It's good those haughty little pets are illiterate; I didn't have to worry about them seeing anything. The security was good, though."

It made sense. Born, reared, and expiring in their cages, pets lived their entire lives without any knowledge of the outside world. The

salon where the pets gathered was, from Riki's perspective, a twisted playground for dolled-up children. Everything in their environment was simplified, and security watched every move they made. Without a pet ring serving as its personal ID, a pet couldn't even leave a room.

"But every system has its holes. Press them in the right way, and the system can be compromised, even without the proper passwords."

"I know that," Riki scoffed. He wasn't that dumb of a mongrel. "Alec said a computer is worse than a woman—if you try a strong frontal assault, you'll get slapped. If you're a gentleman and go from the side, you'll get what you want soon enough."

Katze froze up for a moment. The sudden silence was due to, Riki assumed, the mention of Alec. Referencing his old partner was incidental, but Katze's reaction was interesting.

Riki decided not to ask if Alec was still one of Katze's couriers. Katze didn't say anything more on the subject, either, and instead went back to his confession.

"Because access to the databases was time-limited, I couldn't get everything I needed all at once. But the thrill of cutting off the connection one step ahead of security excited my missing parts. The answers weren't apparent all at once, but I couldn't resist that pins-and-needles feeling. You know what I'm talking about, Riki."

Riki *did* know what he was talking about. That thrill. That arousal. Long ago he had prowled the Midas nights in search of those same moments of ecstasy.

"A slum mongrel installed as furniture had pilfered the secrets of Tanagura—and without anyone noticing. I couldn't keep the excitement to myself, so I let others in on the secret. But you can see what it got me," Katze said, fingering the long scar across his face. "Iason just told me I deserved it with that thin smile of his." As if envisioning that smile and that cruel, mocking voice, Katze shivered a bit as his eyes darkened.

"He knew from the start—he was only waiting for the day I'd slip

up. It was all part of the fun. That's the way they do things there, Riki. I count myself lucky for getting away with a slashed face. The alternative was a lifetime spent as flesh in the markets."

There was no bluster in his words, no swallowed passions. He spoke of his own past as dispassionately as he might of a stranger's. Just how much bitterness had he choked down? The questions festered at the back of Riki's mind. In the end he only awkwardly lowered his eyes.

But the thoughts still rankled. What was Katze up to? Why had he come clean about the past *now*? Far away in another world, someone had once told him: *A shared joy doubles itself. A shared misery halves itself.* It seemed too unbelievable, but was *that* Katze's motivation?

No way.

He didn't want to ask. He didn't want to know. *Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.* But regardless of what he wanted, Riki knew he had to start dealing with the truth. If he didn't, he had the feeling he'd never free himself of the curse Katze had saddled him with.

"I still don't see what this has to do with Kirie," Riki spat out slowly, "but I really don't give a damn. I'm not getting involved with him, even if you're *trying* to say that he dug himself too deep. Besides, you're so tight with Iason, you must have more sway than me. Save Kirie yourself."

There was no doubt that Kirie had been the one to bomb the Jeeks headquarters. Because of that, even if Riki wanted nothing to do with Kirie, there was still a lot of cleaning up to do *because* of Kirie. The last thing he wanted was another chore on top of everything else.

"Three years, Katze. If you were furniture back in the day, you'd have some idea—" Riki cut himself off when Katze just stared at him. Riki took a moment, then hardened his stare right back.

"If you don't want Kirie to make the same mistake that I did, Katze, then *you* do the convincing. I don't want to have anything to do

with Iason. I got my freedom, and I'm leaving the past behind me."

Katze let out a deep sigh. He took out another cigarette. Like the collective silence that had no place to go, the drifting purple haze from the stick wavered forlornly in the air before dissolving into nothing.

It had started raining at some point, drenching the cold night. Riki threw himself on his narrow bed and stared up at the stained skylight. Wherever his eyes focused, it was not the present reality he was looking at.

Deep within his head, Katze's words still echoed. And not the ones that had to do with Kirie.

"Remember, Riki," Katze had said before Riki's exit. "Just because Iason removed your pet ring doesn't mean that he's through with you. He would never be so charitable."

He'd spoken without effect, almost as if talking to himself. His eyes reflected a significance that rose Riki's hackles.

What the hell was he really trying to tell me?

Again Riki found himself desperately not wanting to know. He didn't want to get dragged into somebody else's fight. And yet, despite his distaste, the deeper meanings of Katze's words wormed their way into his brain.

He didn't sleep well that night.

Chapter 5

Riki dreamed. He hadn't experienced such vivid dreams in a long time. Perhaps seeing Katze after four years had aroused a sense of foreboding that blackened his thoughts—or perhaps, shaken loose by truths he couldn't consciously contemplate, locked-away memories tore free from the vault of his mind. Either way, he dreamed of things he didn't want to remember.

Palace Tower, adorned with the name of the ancient goddess Eos. Iason's private room. The luxurious, spare-no-expense quarters befitted the most powerful person in Tanagura. While Riki didn't appreciate the quality of the furnishings, he did understand that they were high-class goods that didn't uselessly flaunt their existence. It was a kind of casual splendor, although a bit richer than popular taste allowed. Riki didn't know what the rooms of other elites looked like, but Iason's room didn't grate on him.

Not that he felt at home there. He was being fed and housed in a place where his own will was completely ignored. He was an eagle with clipped wings. Unable to do anything of his own accord, the mind-numbing conditions frayed at his nerves. Being shut up in Iason's rooms frustrated and irritated him until he was ready to explode.

"Why the hell won't this door open?" he growled to himself in exasperation. He pounded on the door with both hands, but nothing ever happened. Over the past several months, he'd learned the same lesson. He knew he should control himself, handle things coolly, and properly assess the situation, but he instead carried on like a stubborn child unable to cope. He knew what he was doing was useless, but he couldn't stop.

"I don't get it, Daryl!" he snapped. With no one else to release his smoldering emotions on, Riki glared at the only being in the room. "Didn't you say that after my coming-out party, I could go to the rec center or the salon whenever I wanted to? Why won't the door open?"

"I think that's because you still aren't wearing a pet ring."

Daryl's demeanor—his calm, contained, logical tone of voice—didn't change whether he was being screamed at by Riki or if he was going down on Riki. Daryl precisely answered only the questions Riki asked, perhaps because he was forbidden to talk about anything that went unsaid.

"A pet ring?"

"Yes. A ring with your registration number imprinted on it. You can't set foot outside this room if you're not wearing it."

It was the first time Riki heard of such a thing. It had been four months since he'd been waylaid in the underground dome in Sasan—Area 8 in Midas—and taken to Eos. Four months since Iason had told him, "From this day forth, you are my pet. We'll dispatch you to a party once I'm certain you won't embarrass me. I intend to ferret out whatever redeeming quality you have buried beneath your impertinence."

Though Iason had claimed undeniable ownership over Riki, Riki still had no idea what it meant to be a pet raised in Eos. His "training," rather, had pounded into the marrow of his bones every possible vulgar and humiliating meaning of the word.

"All pets wear them?"

"A necklace or earring or bracelet. There are various types and styles of rings, but every registered pet will always have one. They're the only form of personal ID permitted for pets."

"So if you've got a ring, you can go wherever you want?"

"If your master allows it."

Iason had taken Riki to a coming-out party held for new pets. He'd led him there by a leash attached to a collar around his neck. When Riki had found out that was the "uniform" in which pets made their debut, he'd nearly died from the humiliation. He'd still made his extreme displeasure obvious at the party, separating himself from the other smiling pets there. But lacking a ring of his own, Riki

wasn't even considered an "official" pet.

According to Daryl, a pet didn't usually make its debut until after the ring had been attached. Riki wasn't sure how to interpret that. Did that mean he wasn't recognized as Iason's pet? Did that mean if he continued to defy Iason, he would eventually be expelled from Eos?

Such hopes were soon dashed. He was kept in Iason's room for half a year without a pet ring. The more Riki refused to submit, the more intense Iason's daily training became.

"How long are you going to keep me cooped up in here?"

"Until you've had enough, I suppose."

"No matter what you do, I'm not going to become the pet of some arrogant *Master* Blondy," Riki challenged, spitting out the honorific disdainfully. "Even you should have figured that out at the debut party."

Riki had swiftly gotten into trouble at that party. Parading around with a chip on his shoulder, a brawl had broken out. It left the participants convinced that slum mongrels were crude, ferocious, untamable animals.

But however brazen and embarrassing a display it was, Iason wasn't moved, even in private. Riki soon came to realize it was a facet of unshakable Blondy pride.

"Every party needs a little entertainment on the side. I hardly expected a slum mongrel to deport himself with gentlemanly manners. In any case, your debut as a pet is over and done with for the time being. That makes you my official pet, Riki."

"If that's so," Riki growled, "then hurry up and hand over my pet ring."

Iason made a cold smile, "Well, well. Asking for the leash of his own accord. This is a great step forward."

Riki caught his breath. The manipulative games—the sarcasm and

derisive laughter—were part of his daily routine, but the thought of becoming a pet willingly was an abhorrent one.

"That's not it. Stuck in this room all day is driving me fucking crazy. If I had a pet ring, I could go somewhere else, right? So quit making a big deal out of the whole thing and hand the damned thing over."

Riki still couldn't leave the room without Iason leading him on a leash. Being deprived of a pet ring in the highly security-conscious Eos was an obvious punishment.

And the other pets made their feelings perfectly clear. They took pride in the freedom their rings gave them, and articulated that inbred sense of superiority. Though it was barbaric to make a slum mongrel a pet, at least he was being treated properly and kept to his quarters. They took comfort in that small detail.

Riki didn't care if they looked down at him. All he wanted was his freedom, too; not because of pride, but because going around bound by leash and collar wasn't something he could put up with for much longer. The oppressive feeling that came from being trapped every minute of the day rubbed him raw. With a pet ring, he could at least roam the interior of Eos.

"If that's the only way I can get out of these rooms, then I'll have to put up with it." Riki spoke the words in a more transparent manner than he'd intended. He bit his tongue, but it was already too late.

"I see... the mongrel is as stubborn as I expected. Fine, then. If you want a pet ring so much, I shall give you one."

Riki reflexively shrank away, sensing something ominous in Iason's voice—which was several degrees cooler than usual. Iason cast off his jacket. He strode nonchalantly up to Riki and grabbed his arm.

"Hey, *ow!* Let go!"

Iason dragged Riki into the bedroom and casually tossed him on the bed. The evident differences in their strength made Riki's head spin.

"I keep telling you!" Riki barked. "I'm not some kind of toy!" He was confused and concerned by Iason's unusual actions. When he wasn't

careful, and didn't keep a close eye on the Blondy, he knew bad things were bound to happen.

"Take your clothes off."

Riki bit his lip. With an air of resignation, he stripped himself naked.

Don't ever make me tell you a second time.

If he dawdled, bitched, and moaned, Iason would give him twice the torment. Riki had learn that well. The humiliation of having Daryl wringing the come out of him with his mouth as Iason's finger dug deep inside him was the usual punishment. Decidedly not wanting that, Riki disrobed and turned to Iason.

And gawked in amazement.

Up until then, Iason hadn't even loosened collar of his shirt. Now he was calmly and elegantly removing his clothing.

What the... hell?

Completely confused, Riki stared in mute amazement. Iason, in turn, flashed a seductive smile. "What do you find so surprising? That the master wishes to sleep with his own pet? What could be wrong with that?"

At that moment, Riki regretted asking for the ring from the bottom of his heart.

Z-107M.

Riki's D-type pet ring was a custom-made unit, unlike the rings worn by other pets that were typically fashioned into jewelry. The ring Iason had made for Riki was, to his everlasting shame, a cock ring.

"Look at the mongrel. Look at those hickies he's got.

"They say Iason's sleeping with him."

"Impossible. Why would a master sleep with his pet?"

"It's been a year since his debut, and he hasn't shown up once at a sex soiree."

"Please! The thought of mating with that mongrel makes me sick."

"Then he must be doing it with the furniture."

"Idiot. They'd know better than *that*."

"Even an Academy-manufactured virgin gets broken in before being paired off. He hasn't been with anybody, right?"

"Word is that Iason's keeping him all to himself."

"Ugh. But it's not like the thing could refuse Iason Mink."

The backbiting, the sarcasm, the scorn—it was all on display in the salons. The leisure center where pets spent their free time overflowed with gossip, traded by the self-satisfied pets tended to by their fans and the ones satiating desires in secret back rooms.

But when Riki walked in, every pet stopped what it was doing. They stared at him, radiating undeniable rejection.

Except one. Among all the salon pets, there was one that wasn't intimidated and chose to speak to him.

"Hi. My name's Mimea—do you mind if I sit here?"

"Over here, Riki! Hurry!"

Mimea grasped Riki's hand. Without a moment's hesitation, the two of them ducked into one of the salon's private rooms and shoved the door closed behind them. Mimea turned around, placed her hands on Riki's cheeks, and sighed in relief.

"I'm glad it's not too bad."

"What?"

"Didn't your face get bruised during that fight yesterday?"

"Oh, that? It's nothing."

Daryl's reprimands for acting recklessly weren't enough to keep Riki grounded. Still, Riki knew he needed to be more careful or Iason would punish him. Even if Riki *did* pick a fight, he made sure word of it didn't leak outside the salon.

"But... you were bleeding. I was really afraid you wouldn't be able to leave your room."

"It wasn't enough to get me shut up in there."

"But doesn't Master Iason dote on you, Riki?"

Riki didn't know what could have possibly given rise to such a misunderstanding. He was momentarily at a loss for words.

"It's nothing like that," he said, vehemence coloring his words.

"Of course it is," Mimea stated emphatically. "You're the only one that's remained so beautiful for all this time."

Riki drew his eyebrows together, remembering the circumstances of his life that were the farthest things from "beautiful." If anybody but Mimea had uttered that line, the slightest whiff of sarcasm or derision would have sent him into a rage.

"The parties are so much fun, but as long as my master never says no, I can't refuse even the worst of partners. I can't make my master look bad, right?"

Oh—that's what she's talking about. At last understanding her point, Riki dropped his frame into the sofa. *It's because Iason doesn't make me pair off.*

Obedience and lasciviousness were a pet's primary charms, as they sought to increase their resale value through repeated sexual encounters. The exhibitionism and narcissism made Riki's flesh crawl, but that was the definition of a proper pet in Eos. A formal appearance like a debut meant the pets were the stars of the show

from beginning to end. Aside from his debut party, Riki hardly ever made "formal" appearances—and Riki couldn't have made a worse impression at his debut. He was reminded all over again how loathed and despised a slum mongrel truly was, and he further understood the criminally inhuman heart of the Blondy who had made him a pet.

A sex soiree followed his debut, but he couldn't appear without a designated partner. Consequently, Riki had never appeared at a sex soiree. He wasn't sure he wanted to. The only other parties Riki knew anything about were the dress-up raves the pets flocked to afterward. No one gossiped about the soirees in front of him, so he had no idea what went on. He was at a loss even trying to imagine what they were like.

Until he started talking to Mimea, Riki couldn't even say what passed as common sense among the Eos pets. No matter what kind of party was being held, Riki was treated as an outsider. But he had no inclination to make friends with the other pets. No matter how lonely he might be, all he felt toward them was irritation. In a certain sense, Riki was the perfect loner.

"Even I can't help being a little jealous of you," Mimea told him. "Until you came around, nobody paid any mind to the way things were, because that was just the way things were. A pet having a master who actually cared about her..."

Iason doesn't care about me, Riki thought. Iason toyed with him like a cat with a mouse. But Riki didn't voice his thoughts; grumbling about it to Mimea—a girl that placed quite a different value on sex than he did—wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Nobody dares say so, but they all envy you, Riki, I can understand how Luther and Stein feel, the way they're always throwing your slum background in your face and treating you like an enemy."

"Who are they?"

"Luther is still here, but not Stein. The rumors were true. He went to the Jalan harem."

Jalan was a famous male brothel in Midas—famous enough that even Riki knew about it. Their best workers were all booked a month in advance.

"As a pureblood Silurean, he's got confidence to spare. Even if he and Master Aisha ever part company, he says he'll still probably hold onto his seed rights."

"Seed rights?"

"Yes. When you obtain seed rights, your gametes are registered. You can transfer those rights to the Academy later on."

In other words, the authority to become a breeding stallion.

Riki didn't know how that was different from the pairing that went on in Eos. But he understood that, generally speaking, even when put out to pasture, some pets retained a choice in the matter. In a sense, that was a pureblood's last and final safe harbor, especially since women would always be more valuable due to their ability to bear children.

But Riki was startled for completely different reasons. Ignorance and naiveté were an Eos pet's prime selling points. Their nymphomania focused the sum of their interests on sex alone; they knew no other way of raising self-worth other than by ridiculing each other. Riki considered them all numbskulls with thin vocabularies to match.

So he never would have imagined words like "seed rights" and "gametes registration" falling so easily from Mimea's lips. Perhaps if they were educated properly, even pets could live their lives in a different way,

As soon as that thought sprang to his mind, though, he had to laugh at himself. Stir too much intelligence into the mix and the dilemmas only increased—just as they had for Riki. In that light, for the pets in Eos, ignorance was probably bliss.

"Has he ever had sex with a guy, then?"

"Of course not, Riki! He's a pureblood. His only mating partners are

women, and he only mates with the best. Why would you ask such a thing?"

A pureblood male who'd never had a same-sex encounter. That was probably Jalan's feature attraction. For Stein, no doubt proud of his number one pairing ranking, sex with a man would be an intolerable humiliation.

Riki paused. "Are you sure you're all right hanging out with a guy like me, Mimea?" he asked. "Your master hates my guts. If he ever found out, we'd be in deep shit."

Mimea's owner was Raoul Hamm. He was, in a way, even more of a Blondy elite than Iason. His cold, severe eyes said more than any caustic word.

"It's OK. Nobody's going to talk. If anybody said anything, they'd be in trouble, too. But... do you love me, Riki?"

In that instant, Riki had no idea how to respond. Had he heard her right? His cheeks twitched nervously. Mimea was probably the only person in his entire life capable of asking such a direct question so easily. He wasn't sure if she really understood what she was saying.

"You Academy-manufactured types sure are strange."

Mimea giggled. It was sweet, soft, pretty laughter. Bewitched by her smiling face, for a brief moment he was taken in by her charms. Before he knew it, her body was pressing against his.

"Kiss me."

"What?"

"Kiss me."

Riki stiffened noticeably.

"I'm in love with you, Riki. I'm always happy when I'm with you."

Why did Mimea say such things to him? An Academy-manufactured love doll and a slum mongrel. It was almost laughable; they had nothing in common.

"I love you, Riki."

No, he wanted to tell her. *You're in some kind of dream. We aren't free, Mimea. Not in any way.*

"I'll be betrothed any day now. Once the pairing begins, we'll never be able to meet like this again. I can't stand the thought of that. Please, Riki..."

The kisses they exchanged became more than mere flirtations. Once he slept with her, there'd be no going back. If Iason found out, Riki and Mimea would pay dearly. At best, they'd be sent to some low-grade Midas brothel—at worst, that would be the end of them.

On the other hand, what if Iason *did* find out? Riki figured that if he slept with Mimea, Iason would become the laughingstock of Eos. A slum mongrel could never have his way with an Academy-manufactured love doll—the scandal would shake Eos to the core. By allowing Riki to toy with her and even mount her—the slum mongrel who hadn't appeared once at a sex soiree—she was betraying her master. It would shatter Iason's pride and diminish his power as a Blondy.

For some reason, the suppressed laughter wouldn't stop. Riki had nothing to lose. *Nothing at all.* As the pet ring bit into his loins, Riki's warped thoughts convulsed his face with silent laughter. The head of Bison had sunk lower than a common street hustler. He was turning into a mere pet.

"You're all qanging up on us, trying to destroy our relationship!"

Mimea cried out with pleasure, her voice penetrating him like a

primal scream. To the core of his brain... to the center of his heart.

"You're different from other people, aren't you? You love only me, don't you?"

Her heartrending affection was so painful. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Coward!

With that came a rending, tearing sensation in his back, like being flogged with a nail-studded whip.

But the true fear was still to come.

"You enjoyed Mimea's pleasure without my leave. Did you really believe that you could wrap up everything so cleanly after it was made known, just like that?"

"You are my pet. Know this to the marrow of your bones."

Pulsing pleasure set every hair on end, drove every nerve beyond the limits of reason. Every inch of him was swallowed up by the ripe and throbbing rapture. His body convulsed, paroxysms of electric numbness spasming his muscles. His brains roiled in his skull. A narcotic shock ran across the insides of his eyelids. His body burned and melted into a puddle of flesh.

"Enough... no more... won't... do... it... again... mercy!"

Incandescent.

Incandescent pains...

Incandescent fear...

In the end, he had no idea what he was saying at all.

Riki was woken from the nightmare by his own screams.

He felt like shit. His throat was dry as sand, his joints creaked painfully like rusty hinges, his head rattled and ached. He was on the verge of vomiting.

The three-year bad dream had ended, and he'd returned to the slums. He'd intended to finally remake himself.

That part of my life is over, he reminded himself. There was nothing to constrain him now. And yet... *why?*

Riki wiped the drenching sweat from his face and grit his teeth.

That day, running for dear life, he'd gotten as far as Prage. After spending all his will and energy, the security guards had grabbed him before he could head underground.

"Finally! He can have a few scrapes and bruises, but don't overdo it."

"These slum mongrels are stubborn as hell!"

"With that tracer on him, there's no way he could've gotten away."

They beat the shit out of him, dragged him back to a holding cell, tossed him inside, and shot him full of sedatives. His thoughts grew muddled and dim. The inside of his head deflated like a leaky balloon until he finally lost consciousness.

The next time he opened his eyes, Iason was there.

"Well, you certainly caught a beating. And I told them not to damage the merchandise." Iason grabbed Riki by the jaw and stared

straight into his eyes.

Riki slapped his hand away, "Don't touch me!"

But Iason's frigid gaze didn't waver. "It's been some time since I've seen that fight in your eyes, Riki. Did brawling with the security guards get your dormant slum mongrel blood flowing again?" His tone of voice was eerily calm and quiet—possibly even gentle.

"Shut up already and get on with it."

A cold smile creased the corners of Iason's mouth. "Then you're resigning yourself to your fate? How admirable. But shouldn't you see the error of your ways first?"

In that instant, piercing pain slammed into his groin. Riki moaned and contorted his body, but his arms could only clumsily bend in their shackles, leaving him to endure the stabbing arrows. It was a purity of pain that hadn't consumed him in a long time. With all pleasure held at bay, this hard, writhing agony was a world apart. Faced again with the sensation he'd put completely from his mind, Riki twisted his face as the groans spilled from his throat.

"You remember now, Riki? As long as you wear my pet ring, there's no place you can run, no place you can hide. So why behave in such a foolish manner?"

Iason's cool appeal to rationality infuriated Riki. He wrenched open his eyes and spat a reply, his breath wheezing hoarsely out of his lungs.

"Pet's—life—isn't—worth—shit!"

A moment later, all that emerged from his mouth was a scream rising to a trembling falsetto as the tortuous electric shocks assaulted his body.

"You dislike being a pet so much?"

"Makes—me—sick—"

Iason grabbed Riki by the scruff of his neck. "That's quite the mouth

you have. I wouldn't have believed you could come this far and still find the words."

The electric pain diminished somewhat. Riki gasped for breath, clinging to the new feeling desperately. He drew his eyebrows tightly together, hit his trembling lips, and managed to calm his racing pulse.

Iason's voice echoed in his ear. "The ring can deliver much more than pain. Shall I introduce you to something different?"

Right then, a unique kind of tingling numbness emerged from the gaps between the slackening pain. Riki felt Iason's fingers coiling around the terribly tormented part of his body, Riki's limbs locked up, but for an entirely new reason.

"What, nothing sassy to say?" It was hardly a question that needed asking, but Iason was unrelenting. Riki moaned and writhed. "Or do you like *here* better?"

Something seemed to break and rush outward deep inside of Riki. His cries rose toward a scream. The hot throbbing filled his loins with a scorching heat.

"Without drugs or aphrodisiacs, this alone can sexually stimulate any part of your body. Still insist you're not a pet?"

"*Goddamned—fucking—*" But no matter how he fought, the pleasures being applied to his nervous system climbed his spine. Riki hit back the tears.

"Who is your master?"

"*I'm—nobody's—bitch!*" Riki spat. All that remained was his pride.

Riki didn't care to remember the past. But nightmares didn't feast on reason. Memories only repeated themselves. Even Iason's words back then—*You should go back to where you belong, back to your slums*—were like a dream to him now. If he knew *then* where he'd end up now...

Riki caught his breath, as if he'd suddenly lost all his bearings.



Chapter 6

The stars twinkled in a clear night sky. The shaded crescents of the two moons hanging in the heavens stood out in sharp relief against the blackness of space. The frigid darkness hung around a man's shoulders like a cold, thin blanket. As far as the eye could see, everything was still as death.

An orange glow punctuated the gloom, betraying all the confidence of a single spot of light surrounded by a sea shadows. Huddled behind a wall that swallowed up the light, Guy breathed another small sigh.

"Figures. I'm early."

He hadn't noticed the text message from Kirie on his terminal until the night before. *We need to talk*. That one sentence was followed by a meeting place and time.

It was thanks to Kirie that they had to take care of Jeeks. Guy's world was in an uproar because of it. Considering the circumstances, Kirie brazenly sending him a message like that left him speechless.

But he really wanted to know what the little bastard was up to. It was because of Kirie, flashing his money all over the place and letting his ego inflate, that Jeeks had been exhibiting such violence. The whole lot of them were a bunch of ill-bred slum rats. The two groups together, working in a vicious cycle, had made the slums a hot place to live.

Guy thought of ignoring the one-time text message, but he had a few bones of his own to pick with Kirie—so he decided to meet with the prick. But with the appointed time approaching, Guy was harboring second thoughts. *If Riki finds out, he's gonna blow*.

They all knew Riki hated Kirie's guts and made no effort to hide it. Kirie was about the same. He made no attempt to subdue his words and actions, no matter how often Riki kicked him aside.

The animosity shared by Riki and Kirie felt more like a blood feud than that of born enemies. The family resemblance couldn't be clearly pointed out, but at times, things unexpectedly turned up. The way Luke and the others had fastened onto Kirie convinced Guy he wasn't just seeing things. Sid was the one who brought Kirie in. When Guy thought about it, it was Kirie who had wanted access to the Hermes hideout all along and planned out how to latch onto Sid. Though Riki had cast off the reins and dissolved the gang, the name of Bison lived on in legend and attracted the hangers-on: sweet-talkers, groveling ass-kissers, and those who got their asses kicked but never learned. They just kept coming.

Among them all, Kirie was the only one who made it stick.

Perhaps they were all chasing the same shadow of Rikiw they'd caught sight of. Even now, Guy couldn't help laughing at himself. Their indulging attitudes fed Kirie's massive ego. Kirie's brightly lit air car was a garish extension of his own head. He couldn't help acting like anything but the snob that he was.

Guy and the others didn't envy the arrogant eyes looking down on them so much as they found the whole thing ridiculous. They understood the roiling essence of their own natures. And so they understood what was essential and what was waste. Kirie was waste.

Then one day, without word to anyone, Riki vanished from the slums.

The cost of using Kirie to numb that sense of loss was Jeeks. They couldn't solely blame Kirie, but Kirie's gas bomb was the straw that broke the peace and calm of their daily lives. There was no going back.

Then again, an unexpected windfall had come their way as well.

Riki the Black, huh? Guy lit a cigarette and took a drag. Why Riki had quit Bison—those three missing years—was reason enough to justify visiting Robby the information peddler. Even if Guy gained only a glimpse of the truth.

"You've gotten pretty scary, Riki. Even with you dragging your butt around like a beaten dog, you've still got a few aces up your sleeve."

Robby's words were strangely reassuring. Despite all outward appearances, Riki was still Riki. Knowing that, Guy felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his chest.

"Guy?" A voice called from the darkness, interrupting his thoughts.

"That you, Kirie?"

"Yeah," was the short reply, followed by the crunching sound of feet on rubble. "Sorry for making you come to a place like this."

Listening to the approaching footsteps, Guy suddenly wondered how long Kirie had been there. Guy hadn't noticed Kirie's arrival at all, despite the dead quiet all around. Still, he didn't want to think too much about that; he just wanted to get this over with. He ground out his cigarette with the tip of his boot and waited for Kirie.

"Thanks for coming," Kirie greeted with a smile. At least, Guy thought it was a smile; Guy was going on the nuance of the voice he heard in the darkness.

"Let's just do this, all right? It's not like I was dying to see you again." Guy wanted to make it clear from the start that he didn't intend to get friendly with Kirie.

"You just wanted to get the first blow in."

"Whatever," Guy replied shortly. "I have a few things to talk to you about, too."

It was the real reason Guy had come.

"Huh... he's not picking up."

After letting Guy's phone ring a dozen times, Riki finally cut the connection. He'd thought of grabbing some dinner with Guy, but

that wouldn't happen if he couldn't get ahold of the man.

"That's that, I guess," Riki said with a sigh, and left his apartment alone.

Kirie's air car skipped above the bright neon, scattering reflections in its wake. Surrendering himself to that unique floating sensation—quite unlike the thrill of racing along in a jet bike—Guy uttered a resigned sigh under his breath and wondered how things had come to that point.

Meeting up with Kirie and giving him a piece of his mind *should* have been the end of things... but Kine kept insisting, promising Guy good information.

"Just give me a chance," Kirie wheedled. "I've got your best intentions in mind, man. And you've got nothing to lose seeing this thing through."

Kirie was definitely feeding him some sort of line. Taking a ride in his air car had been the last thing on his mind. But then Kirie had said, "Look, just meet with him. Just to prove that I made the effort. You do that, and I promise you won't regret hearing the story he's gonna tell you."

The story he's going to tell me.

"Don't you want to know what Riki was up to after he left Bison?"

Any other subject than that and Guy would have turned on his heel and left. He could understand Robby feeding him a line like that, but Kirie? What did *he* know?

But the story of Riki's three missing years was something Guy wanted to know. No matter what. The insinuations in Kirie's smile were getting to him, so Guy yielded to the pressure and ended up in the air car.

He should have been worried about where they would end up, but he wasn't. Slicing through the poisonous neon landscape, Kirie

slipped the air car into the narrow canyons between an outcropping of buildings. Too late, Guy was asking himself what the hell was going on.

They landed and got out. Kirie gave no indication of their final destination as he strode several paces ahead. Now and then he looked back over his shoulder to confirm that Guy was still there, then continued on his way.

When they finally arrived, Guy found himself in a gorgeous suite, the likes of which he'd never seen before. "Shit," he muttered. *A place like this must cost a fortune.*

The broad, wide space boasted every possible convenience. The polished surfaces of the furnishing and appliances in the room glimmered with a rich luster. Compared to the drab slums, the place made Guy feel uncomfortable and out of place. He knew he'd come to a place where he absolutely did not belong. That discomfiting feeling only grew when, at length, an exquisite, golden-haired man appeared in front of him.

A Blondy! The nobility of Tanagura, the elite of the elite.

Guy suddenly recognized him as the same man they'd seen that day in Mistral Park. The one who had affected Riki so much. Even with his face half-hidden by wraparound sunglasses, there was no way he could conceal such unworldly beauty.

"Thank you for seeing us." Kirie bowed his head in front of the Blondy.

It was so unlike the arrogant punk Guy knew that he almost laughed out loud. For a long second he gawked at the two of them. But the way the cold eyes stabbed through Guy like a pair of ice picks made hair stand up on the back of his neck.

"So you finally decided to come see me." The echoes in the Blondy's words made Guy's heart race. "Good work. And here is your promised reward."

He gave Kirie a card and Kirie slipped it into his breast pocket. A

look of dumbfounded incomprehension eclipsed Guy's face as he looked back and forth between Kirie and the Blondy.

"Sorry, Guy," Kirie said in response "But a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. There was no getting to the next level without you."

In that instant, realization dawned over Guy like an electric shock inside his head. "W-wait a minute!" his stuttered. "What the hell? Is this some kind of joke?" His indignant voice rose into a strangled scream. The blood surged in his veins, slamming like a tidal wave against his heart.

"He wanted you no matter the cost," Kirie said, a strangely cajoling lilt to his voice. "It's a win-win situation for both of you."

Guy felt like his rising temper had suddenly been dashed with a bucket of cold water. "So you make your silver selling out your friends," he murmured, the revelation fully forming in his mind as the words left his mouth. But it was a little too late for his own good. This was Kirie's "business"... this was why he was getting chummy with the slum brats.

"Don't be so naive. An opportunity falls into your lap and you grab it. Doesn't everybody? Otherwise, you'll be slum trash forever. I'll do whatever it takes to get out of the slums."

The obvious glee Kirie took in playing so dirty made Guy narrow his eyes. Guy could hear echoes of Riki in the words Kirie spat at him. Yet another family resemblance.

I'm not sitting around with a sappy look on my face for the rest of my life, Riki had once said. What waste. If I stay like this forever, I'm gonna rot from the inside out.

Why did Riki hate Kirie so much? For the first time, Guy felt he understood. It was why they had all been initially attracted to Kirie in the first place, why they had turned to him when Riki had disappeared. But none of that mattered. Kirie wasn't anything.

The copy wasn't anything like the real thing.

Riki casting aside Bison was a measure of his pride and

determination. By selling out his friends, Kirie was chucking his pride in the gutter. What they were doing seemed similar, but why they did it was where the real differences came through.

"I've got plans for my fixture. Don't you?" Kirie mocked him.

You're the one grasping at straws, Guy thought, but he kept the words to himself. What he said at that point would make no difference.

"This is your chance to be an elite's pet. My treat. That brass ring is right there, and all you've got to do is grab it. With time, you'll be *thanking* me for this."

Guy had no doubt that Kine was very wrong in that regard. It was never going to happen. He and Kirie were searching for two different things, and this spun-out version of reality was the only way Kirie could cope with what he was doing. Though it would piss off most people, Guy cooled down and took control of his feelings.

Guy pitied Kirie's stupidity. Someday he'd get what he deserved—he could picture it plainly. *Do unto others exactly what they did unto you* was the law of the slums. And when that time came, Kirie would regret not having friends to back him up.

"Well, treat him nice," Kirie said flippantly. The Blondy nodded. Kirie left without looking back once. Without Kirie's chatty snark, the room fell into a strange silence.

"You gave in pretty quickly," the Blondy said at last, sounding a bit disappointed. "I was hoping for some yelling and pleading." He laughed coldly out of the side of his mouth.

Thinking of how best to reply, Guy averted his eyes for a moment. "Seems to me throwing a fit won't change anything."

The Blondy quietly agreed with him, his voice so calm that Guy was certain the feeling was wholly authentic.

A Tanagura Blondy was right in front of him. Guy knew it wasn't a dream or an illusion, but he couldn't shake the feeling that this was some kind of bad joke.

"So... how much did Kirie get for me?"

"Ten thousand."

Guy gaped without intending to. He laughed derisively, a gut reaction to the absurdity of the number. "He's overcharging you, you know? A slum mongrel would slit his own throat for that much cash."

"Kirie said much the same."

The silences between their words suggested unspoken additions.

"For the time being, let's can this shit about turning me into a pet."

"Why's that?"

"There's nothing desirable about me. No diamond in the rough here—just gravel no Blondy would ever take to. So you must have other motives in mind if it really had to be me."

The Blondy smiled, his lips drawing a thin, cold line. Guy got the feeling he was being shown a completely different breed of man. He sunk back into silence.

"Well, make yourself at home."

That was the farthest thing from Guy's mind. And knowing that the Blondy knew that, Guy turned and struck a defiant pose.

"If you're hungry, I could have something prepared for you."

Guy gave in. "Shit, if you insist." It looked like it was going to be a long night, and he couldn't really get away. He decided to make the best of what he could. If he played along, maybe he'd discover something interesting.

"What would you like?"

"Whatever you got," Guy shot back as he sat down on the sofa. He couldn't imagine what kind of food was consumed in such resplendent accommodations.

Clearly taking no offense, the Blondy activated a terminal with a practiced hand. Glancing at him, Guy sighed again.

Yeah, some sort of joke. Who would want a slum mongrel this badly? They were dead enders. Every road out of the reality that was the slums ended with a roadblock. Ground down with despair, the mongrels stagnated and decayed in the dark. Guy had always believed he'd rot away the rest of his life there.

He didn't possess Riki's strong animal magnetism, nor the relentless drive that propelled Kirie to step all over others in order to plow his own path. He didn't have the courage to make a break for the outside world. So what was a person like him doing here?

No matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn't figure that one out. He would have a good laugh when he woke up the next morning and discovered it had all been a passing dream. Resigning himself to apathy, Guy heaved another sigh.

At about that same moment, Kirie chuckled to himself. Tricking Guy and delivering him to Iason had been too easy. He'd played it so smooth he hadn't broken a sweat. He didn't feel a twinge of guilt. If he knew his conscience was going to bother him in the least, he wouldn't have called Guy in the first place. Far from it, a thin smile came to his lips.

He'd scored big time. But deeper inside him and with greater intensity, other things disturbed his peace of mind. Guy had occupied his thoughts far more than was necessary. All those outbursts of envy smoldering inside of him—today he was kissing them all goodbye. With that resolution, he couldn't hold down the laughter bubbling up inside of him.

Serves the bastard right.

For some reason, the image that came to his mind in that instance was not that of Guy, but of Riki. The legendary Riki, who'd sauntered back into the slums one year earlier. During his three-year absence, Kirie had never been able to win over Guy, Riki's

pairing partner. That asshole had given him the cold shoulder at every turn.

But now Kirie had gotten back at Guy. And when Riki found out...

Kirie hoped to see Riki's reaction then. The thought made him snicker. Would he be surprised? Angry? Would he scream? Or grieve? He wanted to see Riki's casual attitude finally give way.

With those warped sentiments warming his heart, Kirie climbed into his air car and sped off into the night.

AI NO KUSABI
THE SPACE BETWEEN

Vol.4

Suggestion

Fall 2008

Afterword

Hello there.

"Ah!" I say, and January is gone.

"Eh?" I inquire, and February skips town.

"No way!" I wail, like I'm posing for "The Scream" by Edvard Munch, and March has flown the coop.

April, and I catch a terrible cold. Feeling like something the dog dragged in. I take to my deathbed for a week. Before I know it, Golden Week has come and gone.

Tears and lamentations.

Last year, I really tied myself up in knots, and so this year, I resolved to schedule everything very carefully and take my work at a more leisurely pace.

But I blink my eyes once and it's May!

"Argh!"

I pledge to complete this *much*—and then I turn around, and, for goodness' sakes, it can't be the end of 2004 already!

Well, then.

Volume three of *Ai no Kusabi*. The three years of humiliation and desire that Riki and Iason spent together. A chance meeting between Riki and Robby, still shackled to the fear and loathing from their time together at Guardian. And Kirie, scheming craftily in dark and sharpening his knives.

What do you think of the "Nightmare" that arises when these three threads of the story weave themselves together? The subtitle of this volume refers to the pain and suffering of the past that nobody wishes to remember.

I pretty much glossed over it in the hardcover edition, but I finally have dealt with the details of those three years with Riki and Iason. At any rate, it's nice to get it squared away in a single volume, just as I hoped to all along.

Apart from the animated version, I also hope you'll enjoy those three years as depicted in the original drama CD published by *Magazine Magazine*, titled *Dark Erogenous*. The way Iason (Kaneto Shiozawa) and Riki (Toshihiko Seki) interact really gets the senses tingling, if you know what I mean.

And the painful dilemmas faced by Raoul (Sho Hayami), as one of the elites "to the manor born," and Daryl (Ryoutarou Okiayu). And the first awakenings of love in Mimea (Emi Shinohara). The passionate performances of the cast make for a complete listening experience, one that I'd like you to partake of as well. I can't get the incredible music out of my head. It's that good.

It shouldn't be out of print yet, so those who are interested should pay *Magazine Magazine* a visit as quickly as possible! (Please forgive me, but I can't answer any questions about its availability. Alas, it's not something I have any control over.)

Well, then, again.

As for my future plans, *Children's Corner: Sports Day Edition* should be coming out about the same time as this book. And in February, Kadokawa will launch the "perfect edition" version of the *Bad Luck Conditions* drama CD.

Then in August, Movic will release the second edition of the *Double Helix II* ("The Chains of Love") drama CD. Just like the previous installment, it's super intense and totally hard-boiled.

I look forward to meeting you again in the fourth volume of *Ai no Kusabi*. Yes, I'm working as fast as I can. Shoulder's to the wheel!

Until next time,

Rieko Yoshihara

May 2004